

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Christ and Civilization

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On December 25 and January 7 nearly two billion people will celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. The celebration is doubly ironic, for the dates are not his birthday, and most celebrants have forgotten—or, more likely, have never learned—the meaning of his birth. One of the most enthusiastic celebrants of Christmas I have known was an atheist. She loved the colorful decorations, the intoxicating smells, the cheerful songs, the plentiful food and drink, the smiling faces of children, exchanging gifts, and the feeling of goodwill, however fleeting. She, like hundreds of millions of others, was a devotee of Christmas, but not a disciple of Christ.

Hundreds of millions of churchgoers, unlike my atheist acquaintance, add religious feelings to their list of things to like about Christmas: They seek and find feelings of awe and wonder from visiting cathedrals, listening to choirs and oratorios, observing rituals and processions performed by gaudily attired priests; and they think those feelings of transcendence are somehow Christian. The churchgoers are more deluded than the atheist.¹

This profound ignorance of Christ—an ignorance that does not even realize it is ignorance—is a tragedy of eternal proportions, for the life of Christ—his birth, life, death, and resurrection—is not only the most important event in the history of mankind, but far more important, the only way to Heaven. In fact, if Christ were not the only way to Heaven, his life would have no importance at all. Christ's life is the point from which we date all of world history, and it is impossible to understand history and Western civilization, especially the United States, without understanding Christianity.

¹ Ironically, these religious-experience-seeking churchgoers are also likely to deride fundamentalists for their emotional altar calls. They should remove the board from their own blinded eyes before trying to remove a speck from another's.

It has been more than 2,000 years since Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and since that time the world has changed immensely. Jesus, born and reared in small towns in Judea, one of the lesser provinces of the Roman Empire, lived only 33 years—a young man by modern standards—and taught only three years—a short career—before he was tortured and executed by a local Jewish mob, instigated by leaders of the Temple cult, and the Imperial Roman government. Had Jesus been an ordinary man, it would all have ended with his death. No one would have noticed. At best he would have been another statistic in the long annals of cruelty inflicted by ancient Rome. But Jesus was far from being merely an ordinary man; he was and is the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, the *Logos*, the Logic and Wisdom of God. Three days after his crucifixion, he walked out of his guarded tomb, just as he had predicted. The worst the world's Empire could do had failed. Jesus was alive, never to die again.

About six centuries earlier and a few hundred miles to the east, King Nebuchadnezzar of the Empire of Babylonia had had a dream. He saw “a great image. This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before” the King, and “its form was awesome. This image's head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay.” Nebuchadnezzar “watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. The iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole Earth” (*Daniel 2*).

In these words, God, through Daniel, foretold the coming of Christ and his Kingdom. Christ was the stone—the Rock—that would crush the great image into dust and

blow it away, and the image represented the empires of the world. For the past two thousand years the stone has been growing, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes visibly, always inexorably. Christianity has profoundly changed the societies to which it has come, their institutions, beliefs, and cultures. What has emerged can only be described as a new civilization.

The World Christ Entered

Americans, if we think about the subject at all, entertain a romantic and idealized view of Greece and Rome as peaceful, pleasant, and free societies. We see the statuary and the ruins, we hear the philosophers discussed and praised, and we read the exploits of the Caesars. Athens, we are told, was a model of enlightenment and democracy, and Rome was a model of justice and law. It is largely to Greece and Rome, to their philosophers and statesmen, so the traditional story goes, that we owe our freedom, our civilization, and our prosperity.

The *World Book Encyclopedia*, commonly used by high school students, informs its readers that "The principles that bound the Roman Empire together—justice, tolerance, and a desire for peace—influenced countless generations." But the very next sentence—so startling in contrast to the first—is closer to the truth: "Roman cruelty and greed caused great misery, and the use of force brought hardship and death."² Rome was an empire of violence, not justice; it grew through conquests accomplished by armies led by brilliant generals; and it was held together by the feared Roman legions. It tolerated no disobedience, and peace was a rare event. Even at its best, that is, the *Pax Romana* of the first and second centuries after Christ, the Empire was, in the Roman historian Livy's words, "rich in catastrophe, fearful in its battles, fertile in mutinies, bloody even in peace."³ The debt that Western civilization owes to Greece and Rome has been exaggerated. To understand the impact of the coming of Christ, one must have a more accurate understanding of the classical world.

Classical Religion

Greece and Rome were not secular states; they were drenched in religion. There was then no significant distinction between sacred and secular; that was a later Christian idea. On Paul's arrival in Athens he found a city "given over to idols" (*Acts* 17:6). Dreams, omens, ghosts, apparitions, and the "evil eye" were both feared as sources of harm and sought as sources of guidance.

² "The Roman Empire," Volume 16, 380-381.

³ The ancient world was one "in which a large part of the labor force worked under various forms of non-economic compulsion, in which for a long period and over wide stretches of territory gladiatorial combats to the death provided the most popular form of public entertainment for the elites and the masses alike, in which brigandage and piracy and reprisals were often encouraged and even practiced by 'civilized' governments" (M. I. Finley, *Ancient History*. New York, 1987, 70-71).

Astrology was a science and part of high culture, enjoying the respect psychiatry does today. Idols, images, and shrines were ubiquitous. Animal sacrifice was a regular part of religious worship, and festivals and holidays—by one count 109 days each year were holidays in Rome—were frequent. Temple prostitution was commonplace. The name of the Greek city of Corinth, a center of religious devotion, became synonymous with sexual immorality. To "corinthianize" was to engage in the most perverted and debauched sexual practices. In the pagan culture of Rome, homosexuality was commonplace and accepted.

The Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were men and women larger than life. They fought, they schemed, they lied, they got drunk, they raped, and they committed incest. The Romans worshiped twelve major gods and goddesses and thousands of lesser gods, which had arisen from the animism of early Rome. There were gods for war, fertility, love, harvest, travel, doors, *ad infinitum*. Each god and goddess had his or her own sphere of influence, his or her department; and the devout Roman did not worship one god to the exclusion of others, but worshiped all as circumstances demanded. A succession of spirits "watched over each period of a man's life from birth to death. Juno Lucina, Candelifera, and the Carmentes aided at birth. It was Vagitanus only who could inspire the first cry. Cunina guarded the infant in its cradle, giving place to Cuba when the small Roman attained the distinction of a bed. By Rumina he was taught to take his mother's milk; Edusa and Potina watched over him in the days on his weaning. Fabulinus taught him to talk; Stailinus to stand; Abeona and Adeona attended him in his first ventures from the house;...Catius sharpened his wits; Sentia deepened his feeling; while Volumna stiffened his will.... Viduus parted body and soul."⁴ Prayers and pilgrimages to shrines and temples were a common part of life in the ancient world. Features of Roman religion included not only astrology, but also witchcraft and ghosts; divination by dreams, by birds, and by entrails; magic, spells and hexes; heroes, gods, and goddesses; holy water, holy tombs, holy relics, holy cities, holy shrines, and holy days; visions, signs, and incantations; animal and human sacrifices; miracles of healing, of nature, and of destruction; rituals, processions, statues, and frescoes; incubation, curses, and worship of the dead; worship of Diana, Queen of Heaven; mendicant priests, monks, and asceticism; incense, bells, and choirs, *ad infinitum*. Roman society was very religious, and that religion did not end until the Christian Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Roman and Greek religions were very different from Christianity, not only in their polytheism (or, more accurately, polydemonism), but in that the pagan religions did not emphasize knowledge, learning, understanding, and teaching. They had no sermons, no books to be studied, no body of doctrine to believe.

"The chief objects of pagan religions," W. E. H. Lecky tells us, "were to foretell the future [through the study of

⁴ Gordon J. Laing, *Survivals of Roman Religion*, 3-4.

animal entrails and later the questioning of oracles], to explain the universe, to avert calamity, [and] to obtain the assistance of the gods. They contained no instruments of moral teaching analogous to our institution of preaching, or to the moral preparation for the reception of the sacrament, or to confession, or to the reading of the Bible, or to religious education, or to united prayer for spiritual benefits.⁵

One result of this anti-intellectualism was, of course, that religious piety was expressed in religious behavior—attending temples, offering sacrifices, making pilgrimages—for “the Greeks valued ‘orthopraxy,’ right doing, rather than orthodoxy.” In all this, Greek religion “reflected and supported the general ethos of Greek culture. It discouraged individualism.... it emphasized the sense of belonging to a community and the need for the observance of social forms.”⁶ Greece enforced those emphases with death.

To the extent that teaching, reading, and education were done in Greece and Rome, they were functions not of the priests, but of the philosophers, who were largely unconnected with the popular religious cults. Christianity, by contrast, made theological and moral knowledge and teaching both central to the mission of the church and available to all, not just to the aristocratic classes thought to be capable of virtue. (This was not true of the Catholic Religion, which later split into the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches. From the fifth century on, the Catholic Religion preferred to use images: icons, statues, frescoes, and so forth, not literature, to “teach” the populace. And those thought to be capable of virtue were the “religious,” not the laity; the “religious” were the new Catholic aristocratic class.) Lecky, certainly no Christian, wrote: “Under its [Christianity’s] influence, doctrines concerning the nature of God, the immortality of the soul, and the duties of man, which the noblest intellects of antiquity could barely grasp, have become the truisms of the village school, the proverbs of the cottage and of the alley.” (This, of course, was the result of the Reformation, not of Catholicism.)

Because of the variety of gods in Rome, some historians have mistakenly concluded that Rome enjoyed religious liberty. But the command of the Twelve Tables (c. 450 B.C.), as well as the persecution of religious dissenters, makes it clear that religious liberty was not a feature of Roman society: “Let no one have gods on his own, neither new ones nor strange ones, but only those instituted by the State.” In the second century after Christ, the pagan jurist Julius Paulus reported a contemporary legal decree:

⁵ Lecky, *History of European Morals*. London (1869) 1946, II, 1.

⁶ Robert Parker, “Greek Religion,” *Oxford History of the Classical World*, 1986, 261. This, of course, is contrary to the assertions one finds in some “Christian” theologians that the Greeks were uninterested in practice or in this world, but were focused on another world, the world of Plato’s Forms. These semi-educated writers compound their errors by contrasting the “otherworldliness” and “individualism” of the Greeks with the “earthly” and “communitarian” Hebrews. They might correct their errors by studying *Hebrews* 11 and related passages.

“Of those people who introduce new religions with unknown customs or methods by which the minds of men could be disturbed, those of the upper classes shall be deported, those of the lower classes shall be put to death.” The only religions permitted in Rome were those licensed and approved by the state.

Both the Greek *poleis* and the Roman Empire were totalitarian church-states. For the ancient as well as the medieval pagans, statecraft was soulcraft. Socrates was executed for being an atheist, that is, for corrupting the youth of Athens by teaching them to doubt the gods of Athens. Others suffered the same fate. Centuries after Socrates was executed by the Athenian democracy, Pliny the Younger, Special High Commissioner to the provinces of Bithynia and Pontus, wrote a letter to Trajan the Emperor in A.D. 111. His letter illustrates both Rome’s treatment of religious dissenters and its lack of a justice system:

“This is the plan which I have adopted in the case of those Christians who have been brought before me. I ask them whether they are Christians; if they say yes, then I repeat the question a second and a third time, warning them of the penalties it entails, and if they still persist, I order them to be taken away to prison. For I do not doubt, whatever the character of the crime may be which they confess, their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy certainly ought to be punished....” In Rome, “pertinacity” was a crime punishable by indefinite incarceration.

Pliny explained what his subjects were required to do in order to regain their freedom:

“Those who denied that they were or had been Christians and called upon the gods in the usual formula, reciting the words after me, those who offered incense and wine before your [the Emperor’s] image, which I had given orders to be brought forward for this purpose, together with the statues of the deities—all such I considered should be discharged, especially as they cursed the name of Christ, which, it is said, those who are really Christians cannot be induced to do.”

In Rome, as in Athens, one could escape punishment by worshipping the gods.

In one case in which some persons had anonymously accused their neighbors of being Christians, Pliny “thought it the more necessary...to find out what truth there was in these statements [of accusation] by submitting two women, who were called deaconesses, to the torture.... Many persons of all ages, and of both sexes alike, are being brought into peril of their lives by their accusers, and the process [of inquisition and punishment] will go on. For the contagion of this superstition [Christianity] has spread not only through the free cities, but into the villages and rural districts, and yet it seems to me that it can be checked and set right. It is beyond doubt that the [pagan] temples, which have been almost deserted, are beginning again to be thronged with worshipers, that the sacred rites which for a long time have been allowed to lapse are now

being renewed, and that the food of the sacrificial victims is once more finding a sale.”⁷

Pliny was pleased to report that his methods of torture and imprisonment were encouraging people to worship the gods, and that the Roman temples were growing again. Throughout history, coercion has been a favored method of achieving church growth.

In his letter to Trajan, Pliny emphasized that worshipping the Emperor is the way to avoid punishment. At the time of Christ, the Imperial cult was relatively new, having begun with Augustus, and it was the cult that unified Rome. Tiberius succeeded Augustus as Emperor in A.D.14. Here are a few excerpts from a letter Tiberius sent to the magistrate of the city of Gytheon, instructing him in the proper rituals of the imperial cult:

“Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the god Augustus, *pontifex maximus*.... He should place an image of the god Augustus Caesar the father on the first [chair], one of Julia Augusta on the second from the right, and one of Tiberius Caesar Augustus on the third. ... Let a table [for sacrifices] be set by him in the middle of the theater and an incense burner be placed there, and let the representatives and all magistrates offer sacrifices.... Let him conduct the festival on the first day in honor of the god Augustus the Savior and Liberator, son of the god Caesar...” (MacMullen and Lane, 74-75). The worship of the state, in the person of the divine Emperor, was the ideology that unified the Roman Empire at the time of Christ.

War and Peace

The pagan world was not peaceful. Athens, usually considered one of the most peaceful of the Greek city-states, was at war more than two years out of every three between the Persian Wars and 338 B.C., when Philip of Macedon was defeated. The following three centuries were even worse. Athens never enjoyed ten consecutive years of peace.

Livy reports that the Roman Republic was at peace only twice in its entire history, once at the end of the First Punic War in the mid-third century B.C. and once in 30 B.C. after Augustus' defeat of Antony and Cleopatra. War was a way of life in the ancient world.

In the opening pages of the *Laws*, Plato makes Clinias say that “what most men call peace is merely an appearance; in reality all cities are by nature in a permanent state of undeclared war against all other cities.” But in his dialogues Plato depicts a sanitized Athens of intellectuals discoursing on philosophical questions, strolling about the city, eating and drinking from house to house.

“Plato’s dialogues portray Athens in vivid detail, as a world of young and godlike intellectuals meeting in private houses for conversation or social drinking, strolling in suburban parks or walking down to the Piraeus for a festival, listening to famous visitors skilled in rhetoric or

⁷ Ramsey MacMullen and Eugene N. Lane, editors, *Paganism and Christianity 100-425 C.E.* Minneapolis, 1992, 164-165.

philosophy from all over Greece.... Yet for most of the time which Plato describes, Athens was fighting a long and bloody war in which at least half the population died, many of them from a particularly horrifying plague which scarred even those who survived it, and which was partly the consequence of the unsanitary conditions in which vast numbers of citizens were camped, at first in the heat of summer and later all year, on every available space of open or sacred land within the city walls. In reality travel was dangerous and very much restricted; and the way down to the Piraeus must have been as filthy, as stinking, and as crowded as the slums of Calcutta.”⁸

As for Rome, “In the half century of the Hannibalic and Macedonian Wars, ten percent and often more of all adult Italian males were at war year by year, a ratio that rose during the wars of the first century B.C. to one in every three males.”

Finley traces the prevalence of warfare in the ancient world to pagan religion:

“Neither the enormously powerful Roman Mars nor the weaker Greek Ares received the slightest competition from the minor divinities of peace. It was always assumed that divine support was available for a war.... [T]he gods through their oracles and signs [never] recommended peace for its own sake...” (Finley, 68).

It is revealing that despite perpetual war in Greece and Rome, war was neither the title nor topic of a single ancient philosophical treatise. The *Pax Romana* during the first two centuries of the Christian era, although an improvement from earlier centuries, was punctuated by wars on the Empire’s frontiers and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, with the loss of an estimated one to two million lives.

Economics, Slavery, and Work

At the time of Christ, the population of Roman Italy comprised an estimated five to six million free citizens and one to two million slaves. Many slaves worked the mines of the Roman Empire, and they were sometimes forced to live below ground until they died. Slaves were forbidden to marry, and the power of masters over their slaves was absolute. The castes of Roman society—slaves, plebeians, notables, and nobles—were not so rigid at the time of Christ as they had been in earlier centuries, but Roman society remained radically unequal.

The Republic and Empire’s military conquests resulted in the influx of hundreds of thousands of slaves to Rome. These slaves were used not only for work, but also for entertainment in the gladiatorial contests that both nobles and proles loved to attend. The enthusiasm of the Romans for gladiatorial gore both produced and reflected a savage desire for and delight in the infliction of pain. Thousands of slaves died entertaining the Romans. Because they were vivid expressions of the cruelty and will to rule of the Roman elite, the gladiatorial “games”

⁸ Oswyn Murray, “Life and Society in Classical Greece,” *The Oxford History of the Classical World*. New York, 1986, 205.

were part of the official celebration of the Emperor in every large city.

Apart from the gladiatorial combats, “numerous acts of the most odious barbarity were committed: Flaminius ordering a slave to be killed to gratify, by the spectacle, the curiosity of a guest;... Vedius Pollio feeding his fish on the flesh of slaves;... Augustus sentencing a slave, who had killed and eaten a favorite quail, to crucifixion.... Old and infirm slaves were constantly exposed to perish on an island of the Tiber” (Lecky, I, 127).

Slavery was not only the ubiquitous practice of the pagan world, it was the theory as well. The best and brightest of the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, defended slavery, for slaves were naturally inferior beings. The status of slaves, women, and children reflected the judgment of Aristotle that “the deliberative faculty is not present at all in the slave, in the female it is inoperative, in the child undeveloped.” The Christian notion that all men are created in the image of God, and that the image of God is rationality,⁹ was foreign to pagan thought and societies. Murray commented on the status of women in Athens:

“We idealize the Greeks as the originators of Western civilization. But we should remember that (polygamy apart), the position of Athenian women was in most important respects the same as that of the 200,000,000 women who today [1986] live under Islam...” (216).

In any society in which slavery plays a major role, idleness becomes a virtue. It was so in the American South, and so it was in Rome. The Romans held labor in contempt and scorned those who worked with their hands. The workingman was base and a social inferior. All freedmen were artisans and shopkeepers; most shopkeepers and artisans were freedmen; and all were despised. “No one,” Aristotle had written, “who leads the life of a worker or laborer can practice virtue.”

The eloquent Demosthenes, defending himself before an Athenian jury, presented his argument this way:

“I am worth more than Eschinus [the plaintiff] and I am better born than he; I do not wish to seem to insult poverty, but I am bound to say that it was my lot as a child to attend good schools and to have had sufficient wealth that I was not forced by need to engage in shameful labors. Whereas you, Eschinus, it was your lot as a child to sweep, as might a slave, the classroom in which your father served as teacher.” Demosthenes easily won his case.

Seneca, the tutor and later the victim of Emperor Nero, wrote that “The common arts, the sordid arts, are, according to the philosopher Posidonius, those practiced by manual laborers, who spend all their time earning their living. There is no beauty in such occupations, which bear little resemblance to the Good.” The great Roman senator Cicero believed that “wage labor is sordid and unworthy of a free man, for wages are the price of labor and not of

⁹ “The spirit of a man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all the inner depths of his heart” (*Proverbs* 20:27) is one verse among many that teach this idea.

some art; craft labor is sordid as is the business of retailing.” Capitalism could not develop in a society in which such a view of labor prevailed.

Rome’s control over the economy was hampered by the primitiveness of the economy. But wherever economic activity could be controlled, the worldly philosophers and statesmen believed the state had the right to control it. A basic feature of the constitution of Sparta was complete control of economic activity. Athens owned the silver mines of Laurium. *Economics*, a treatise probably written in the third century before Christ and incorrectly attributed to Aristotle, recounts how rulers filled their coffers by robbery and exploitation of their people. The book assumes that every sort of private property is at the disposal of the state. Hasebroek, writing in *Trade and Politics in Ancient Greece*, reports that the control of economic activity in the *poleis* was tyrannical.

As for Rome, “wholesale uncompensated confiscation of private estates and peasant farms to provide bonuses for soldiers was not an uncommon practice.... Eventually all generations of workers—oil-suppliers, butchers, fish handlers, bakers, transport and mine workers, and minor government officials—were frozen in their occupations to stabilize taxes and balance the budget.”¹⁰ Fustel de Coulanges concluded, “The ancients, therefore, knew neither liberty in private life, liberty in economics, nor religious liberty.”¹¹

Life and Death

In the ancient world, abortion, the exposure of infants, infanticide, and suicide were common and legal. At the coming of Christ, the Roman governor in Judea, Herod the Great, in an attempt to murder Jesus, ordered that all the male infants in Bethlehem and the region surrounding it, from two years old and younger, be put to death.

The head of a Roman family had the power of life and death—*patria potestas*—over his children and slaves. At birth, the midwife would place the newborn on the ground, where he would remain unless the father took the child and raised him from the earth. If the father did not lift the child, he—or more likely she—was left to die in some public place. The pagans exposed their children for many reasons: poverty, ambition, or concern about their “quality of life”: “so as not to see them corrupted by a mediocre education that would leave them unfit for rank and quality,” to quote Plutarch. The early Christians rescued thousands of children discarded by the pagans. Pagans also rescued thousands, and they would rear them to be slaves and prostitutes. If infants were born with defects, they were frequently killed, rather than exposed. Infanticide was not merely the practice of the pagans, it was their doctrine as well: Plato and Aristotle endorsed infanticide, and Seneca wrote: “What is good must be set apart from what is good for nothing.”

According to Roman law, the power of the father over his children remained as long as he lived. An adult Roman

¹⁰ E. G. Welton, *Athens and Jerusalem*. Atlanta, 1987, 34.

¹¹ *The Ancient City*. 1901, 222-223.

man could do nothing without his father's consent; his father could even sentence him to death. It is likely that the Mafia inherited its focus on the family from its Roman ancestors.

The contrast between ancient paganism and Christianity is clearest in these matters of life and death. In his *History of European Morals*, Lecky wrote:

"The first aspect in which Christianity presented itself to the world was as a declaration of the fraternity of men in Christ. Considered as immortal beings, destined for the extremes of happiness or of misery, and united to one another by a special community of redemption, the first and most manifest duty of a Christian man was to look on his fellowmen as sacred beings, and from this notion grew up the eminently Christian idea of the sanctity of all human life."

It is not the laws of nature that determine behavior or ethics, for "nature does not tell man that it is wrong to slay without provocation his fellowmen.... [I]t is an historical fact beyond all dispute that refined, and even moral, societies have existed in which the slaughter of men of some particular class or nation has been regarded with no more compunction than the slaughter of animals in the chase. The early Greeks, in their dealings with the barbarians; the Romans, in their dealings with gladiators, and in some periods of their history with slaves; the Spaniards in their dealings with Indians; nearly all colonists removed from European supervision, in their dealings with an inferior race; and an immense proportion of the nations of antiquity, in their dealings with new-born infants—all have displayed this complete and absolute callousness...."

Rather than the laws of nature, Christianity changed ancient culture:

"Now it was one of the most important services of Christianity that, besides quickening greatly our benevolent affections, it definitely and dogmatically asserted the sinfulness of all destruction of human life as a matter of amusement or of simple convenience, and thereby formed a new standard, higher than any which existed in the world.

"The influence of Christianity in this respect began with the very earliest stage of human life. The practice of abortion was one to which few persons in antiquity attached any deep feeling of condemnation.... In Greece, Aristotle not only countenanced the practice, but even desired that it should be enforced by law when population had exceeded certain assigned limits. No law in Greece, or in the Roman Republic, or during the greater part of the Empire, condemned it.... A long chain of writers, both pagan and Christian, represent the practice as avowed and almost universal. They describe it as resulting, not simply from licentiousness or from poverty, but even from so slight a motive as vanity, which made mothers shrink from the disfigurement of childbirth.... They assure us that the frequency of the crime was such that it gave rise to a regular profession.

"If we pass to the next stage of human life, that of the new-born infant, we find ourselves in [the] presence of that

practice of infanticide which was one of the deepest stains of the ancient civilization.... Infanticide...was almost universally admitted among the Greeks, being sanctioned, and in some cases enjoined, upon what we should now call 'the greatest happiness principle,' by the ideal legislations of Plato and Aristotle, and by the actual legislations of Lycurgus and Solon" (Lecky, II, 9-11).

But it was not only public violence that was condoned and encouraged at the time of Christ; suicide was also a virtue. "Suicide was accepted, even admired. The courage of the man who decides to end his suffering and accept eternal rest was extolled by the philosophers, for suicide proved the truth of the philosophical notion that what matters is the quality and not the quantity of time that one lives" (Murray, 229).

Law and Government

Rome is commonly supposed to have given us our system of justice, but the law of Rome at the time of Christ was quite unjust: "In a society as unequal and inegalitarian as the Roman, it is obvious that formal rights, however clear, had no reality, and that a weak man had little to gain by going to court."¹²

Veyne gives this example of Roman law:

"Suppose that all I own in the world is a small farm.... A powerful neighbor covets my property. Leading an army of slaves, he invades my land, kills those of my slaves who try to defend me, beats me with clubs, drives me from my land, and seizes my farm. What can I do? A modern citizen might say, go to court...to obtain justice and persuade the authorities to restore my property....

"For one thing, the aggression against me by my powerful neighbor would have been considered a strictly civil offense; it would not have been covered by the penal code. It would have been up to me, as plaintiff, to see to it that the defendant appeared in court. In other words, I would have had to snatch the defendant from the midst of his private army, arrest him, and hold him in chains in my private prison until the day of judgment. Had this been beyond my power, the case would never have been heard...."

If, however, the victim somehow were to succeed in raising an army, capturing his enemy, bringing him to trial, and winning, "it then would have been up to me to enforce that judgment, if I could.... [A] judge could not sentence a defendant simply to restore what he had taken. Leaving my farm to its fate, the judge would authorize me to seize my adversary's chattels real and personal and sell them at auction, keeping a sum equal to the value placed on my farm by the court...and returning the surplus to my enemy. Who would have considered recourse to a system of justice so little interested in punishing social transgressions?"

But the systemic injustice of the Roman legal system was compounded by its systematic corruption:

¹² Paul Veyne, "The Roman Empire," *A History of Private Life*. Cambridge, 1987, 166.

"A Roman noble (or even a mere notable) [had] more in common with [a] 'godfather' than with a modern technocrat. Getting rich through public service...never stood in the way of taking public service for one's ideal...."

"The honest functionary is a peculiarity of modern Western nations. In Rome every superior stole from his subordinates. The same was true in the Turkish and Chinese empires, where *baksheesh* was the general rule.... Every public function was a racket, those in charge 'put the squeeze' on their subordinates, and all together exploited the populace. This was true during the period of Rome's greatness as well as during the period of its decline.... Even the least important public positions..., such as apparitor or clerk of the courts, were sold by their incumbents to aspiring candidates, because every position carried with it guaranteed income in the form of bribes.... Ancient bureaucracy was nothing like our bureaucracy. For millennia sovereigns relied on racketeers to extort taxes and control their subjects" (Veyne, 167, 97-98, 100).

Even the renowned Roman legions operated this way. The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that "Soldiers traditionally bribed their officers for exemption from service, and nearly a quarter of the personnel of every regiment could be found idling about the countryside or even lounging around the barracks, provided their officer had received his kickback.... Soldiers got the money they needed from theft and banditry or by doing the chores of slaves. If a soldier happened to be a little richer than the rest, his officer beat him and heaped duties upon him until he paid up and received dispensation."

Cicero wrote that the "senatorial way to get rich" was to plunder the provinces under one's jurisdiction. Cicero prided himself on his honesty: After governing a province for a year, he was making the equivalent of a million dollars per year, a sum considered quite small by his peers.

The World After Christ

Christ was born within this pagan culture. But his kingdom, as he explained, while it was in this world, was not of it (*John* 18:36). It found its source, its authority, and its principles elsewhere. Instead of the prevailing polytheism of Greece and Rome he taught monotheism: "I and my Father are one" (*John* 10:30). Instead of the sinful and limited gods of paganism, Christ revealed the holy and transcendent God, creator of Heaven and Earth, ruler of all things. Instead of the pagan gods whose primary pastimes were violence, sexual immorality, and indolence, he taught a rational God who plans and works: "My Father works even until now, and I work" (*John* 5:17). He reiterated and explained the Ten Commandments with their condemnations of idolatry, of the use of images and statuary in worship, of profanity, of disrespect for parents and the Lord's Day, of idleness, of murder, of sexual immorality, of theft, of lying, and of covetousness (*Matthew* 5-7). Even more important than the law, which he explained anew to correct all the misinterpretations of the Jewish lawyers, Christ revealed the Gospel of justification by faith in the righteousness of God alone,

which alone could divinely transform men and societies. Instead of the pagan notion that if men are to have truth, they must discover it on their own power, he taught that God graciously reveals truth to men, and that the revealed truth is written so that all, not just the aristocratic few, might know.

Against the totalitarianism of the pagan world empires, Christ taught the limitation of state power and the separation of church and state: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (*Matthew* 22:21). Neither Caesar nor any other mere man was *pontifex maximus*. Christ himself was the way, the truth, and the life, the only mediator between God and man (*John* 14:6; *1 Timothy* 2:5). He explicitly denied the political theory and practice of the pagans: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise dominion over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant" (*Matthew* 20:25-26). Christ demanded that rulers—both civil and ecclesiastical—serve, not control, the people. He outlined a limited role for civil government, not as the shaper of souls, as in pagan philosophies, but simply as the punisher of criminals. He founded a church whose government was representative and republican, whose officers were elected by the people, and whose constitution—the Bible—was written. Inspired by his words, the American Founders made their plans for a new Republic, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.¹³

The early Christians, condemned by pagans such as Celsus and Porphyry¹⁴ as stupid, foolish, and superstitious, were not killed for their stupidity, but because they rejected the highest value of pagan society: worship of the totalitarian state in the person of the Emperor. The Christians rejected Aristotle ("The state is the highest of all.... Citizens belong to the state....") and believed Christ. Christ, in dying for the salvation of individual men, exalted both the individual and God. God is eternal and men are immortal; nations and rulers come and go with surprising rapidity, but individual souls live forever. Rome is not an eternal city; only individual men enjoy everlasting life.

¹³ The words, of course, are Lincoln's, but he got them from John Wyclif, who wrote of his English translation of the Bible in the 14th century: "This Bible is for the government of the people, by the people, and for the people," a daring rebuke of both civil and ecclesiastical autocrats.

¹⁴ It is an odd fact that there are few references to Christianity among the extant writings of pagan scholars and philosophers. Perhaps those writings were lost or destroyed during the Middle Ages by a totalitarian church, or perhaps the learned pagans did not see the coming of Christianity, just as they seemed unaware of the coming of Christ. Since Christ was a Jew and the son of a carpenter, and Christianity was not a movement of the aristocratic classes, but of the scorned business, worker, and slave classes, it may not have received the notice and early opposition a movement of the upper classes might have. "He catches the wise in their own craftiness..." (*Job* 5:13).

Christ taught that man was a creature of God and the lord of creation. Man's ancestry was not animal, but divine, and the Earth was made for man. Individual men were immortal; what they believed and did on Earth would have eternal consequences. After death, they did not descend into some shadowland, but each was required to give an account of his life to his maker and judge. All men were equal before God and his law, and each man would be judged individually. The classes of ancient society—the nobles, the proletariat, the slaves, the citizens, the men, the women, the Jews, the barbarians—meant nothing to God. In the new Christian faith, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (*Galatians* 3:8).

Christ's kingdom grows only by persuasion, never by coercion¹⁵—it is a republic of knowledge, truth, and doctrine, not an empire of dominion, compulsion, or violence—and it has taken centuries for some Christian ideas to be understood and believed. Nevertheless, as the anguished wailing of Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century so clearly indicates, the absorption of Christian ideas has been widespread, though far from complete.

The Medieval Mess

Had the Gospel of justification by faith alone been preached accurately and believed widely in the Roman Empire, the history of Europe and the Middle East would have been far different from the first century onward. But it was not to be. The Gospel was subverted and attacked in the churches themselves even before the apostles died, and after they died, legalism, the notion that salvation comes by faith and works, became the principal message of the churches. The result was a corrupt mixture of ideas—some from the Bible, many from pagan society, some cooked up by the philosophers and early church theologians.

One chef of the medieval mess was Origen (182-251), who taught that Christ had sowed the "seeds" of Christian doctrine in every man. Christ had "tended" the best in Greek culture, its philosophy and its ethics—just as he had revealed the Law for the Jews. Therefore, Origen concluded, a Christian could not reject either the Roman Empire or Greek culture. The man who perfected this notion in the West (the notion was adopted in the East as well) was Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the official Doctor of the Roman Church-State, who deftly wove the sayings of the early theologians together with those of Aristotle (whom Thomas reverently called "The Philosopher") to produce an intricate system of error that denied the Gospel and ensured that the Roman Church-State would persecute all within its reach who spoke the Gospel. Thomas advocated compulsion of apostates and

¹⁵ "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (*Matthew* 28:19-20).

unbelievers, and exalted images as aids for communicating with and worshipping the divine. He adopted the Orthodox defense of images offered by John of Damascus (675-749), that "any devotion shown to a material object ascends to the spiritual reality it represents." It was this idolatrous religion of immanence, this empirical, earthy, sensate religion that the Reformation abolished in those lands where the Gospel of Jesus Christ was widely believed for the first time in centuries.

Despite the mixture of little truth and much error that prevailed in the Middle Ages, some Christian ideas did have an effect on civil society:

"Under the influence of Christianity, the Roman law of the postclassical period reformed family law, giving the wife a position of greater equality before the law, requiring mutual consent of both spouses for the validity of a marriage, making divorce more difficult..., and abolishing the father's power of life or death over his children; reformed the law of slavery, giving a slave the right to appeal to a magistrate if his master abused his powers and even, in some cases, the right to freedom if the master exercised cruelty, multiplying modes of manumission of slaves, and permitting slaves to acquire rights by kinship with freemen; and introduced a concept of equity into legal rights and duties generally, thereby tempering the strictness of general prescriptions."¹⁶

The codifications of Roman law that came with Justinian and later were due to the belief that "Christianity required that the law be systematized as a necessary step in its humanization."

Christian ideas also had some effect on the invaders who entered Rome in A.D. 410:

"The rulers of the Germanic, Slavic, and other peoples of Europe during roughly the same era (from the fifth to the tenth centuries) presided over a legal regime consisting chiefly of primitive tribal customs and rules of the blood feud. It is more than coincidence that the rulers of many of the major tribal peoples, from Anglo-Saxon England to Kievan Russia, after their conversion to Christianity, promulgated written collections of tribal laws and introduced various reforms.... The Laws of Alfred (about A.D. 890) start with a recitation of the Ten Commandments and excerpts from the Mosaic law...."

But the impact of Christianity during the Dark and Middle Ages was minimal; the focus of the Roman Church-State was not the propagation of the Gospel (in fact, the Roman Church-State persecuted those who propagated the Gospel), but the construction of a so-called Christian empire: Christendom. Some of the blame for Christendom must rest on the Emperor Constantine.

Constantine: Builder of Christendom

To suggest, as some historians (and many others with axes to grind) have done, that Constantine rescued the

¹⁶ Harold Berman, *The Interaction of Law and Religion*. London, 1974, 53.

Christian church from persecution is fantasy. Christians had enjoyed complete tolerance in the Roman Empire from 260-302. More importantly, Christians were persecuted by the regime that Constantine constructed.

What was happening to the churches during that period is significant. As Peter Brown, one of the more reliable ancient historians put it: "The conversion of a Roman emperor to Christianity, of Constantine in 312, might not have happened—or, if it had, it would have taken on a totally different meaning—if it had not been preceded, for two generations, by the conversion of Christianity to the culture and ideals of the Roman world."¹⁷ Brown sees two generations of accommodation, compromise, corruption, and finally conversion of the churches to their culture. But the worldliness of the churches began much earlier, even before the deaths of the apostles.

What the Constantinian establishment of the Catholic Church meant was that the bishops—note that the Biblical, Presbyterian form of church government had been abandoned by the churches before the time of Constantine—the bishops now joined the bureaucrats to form a new governing class in the Empire. The bishops of Italy became the heirs of the Roman Senate, and the bishop of Rome became the Emperor's successor. Throughout the Empire, Catholic bishops used monks (communist ascetics) as terrorists to enforce their rule:

"Bands of monastic vigilantes, led by Schenudi of Atripe (died c. 466) patrolled the towns of Upper Egypt ransacking the houses of pagan notables for idols. In North Africa, similar wandering monks, the Circumcellions, armed with cudgels called 'Israels,' stalked the great estates, their cry of 'Praise be to God' more fearful than the roaring of a mountain-lion" (104). (And we wonder where the Muslims got the idea for their war cry, "Allah Akbar.")

"The Christian bishop," Brown reports, "now ruling large congregations and backed by the violence of the monks, had come to the fore. The Emperor Theodosius committed the bloodbath of Thessalonica [massacring the residents of the city in 390]...yet he went down to history as Theodosius the 'Great,' the exemplary Catholic monarch" (106).

With its legal establishment, the Catholic Church became wealthy as well bloody:

"Wealth might be used to cover the costs of an acquittal at the Last Day.... From the fifth century onwards, this rich flood welled into the Christian Church 'for the remission of sins.' The rise of the economic position of the Christian Church was sudden and dramatic: It mushroomed like a modern insurance company. By the sixth century, the income of the bishop of Ravenna was 12,000 gold pieces; the bishop of a small town drew a salary as great as that of a senatorial provincial governor" (109). The time-honored, traditional Roman system of exploitation of inferiors by superiors, with all the hierarchy exploiting the people, had been adopted by the Catholic Church-State.

¹⁷ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, A.D. 150-750*. London and New York, 1971, 82.

This exploitation was possible only because the Catholic Church had already rejected the Gospel of salvation by free grace. The Catholic Church's rejection of the Gospel of justification by faith alone made all its subsequent errors and atrocities not only possible, but inevitable.

Constantine did not establish Christianity as the only lawful religion of the Empire (an act that would have been Antichristian); he established the Catholic Church as the only lawful church in the Empire, a different Antichristian act.

Some have argued that Constantine's initial intention was freedom of worship for all. The Edict of Milan, issued in 313 with Emperor Licinius, read, in part:

"Since we saw that freedom of worship ought not to be denied...., to each man's judgment and will the right should be given to care for sacred things according to each man's free choice." Eusebius (263-339), bishop of Caesarea, reported a rescript of the Edict of Milan sent to a provincial governor bearing these words: "For a long time past we have made it our aim that freedom of worship should not be denied, but that every man, according to his own inclination and wish, should be given permission to practice his religion as he chose.... Every man may have permission to choose and practice whatever religion he wishes."¹⁸

Whatever Constantine's intention—to recognize genuine freedom of religion or merely to use freedom of religion as a transition from established paganism to established Catholicism—freedom of religion was not the result of his edicts.

In the same year in which he issued the Edict of Milan, Constantine ordered his prefect in Africa to persecute the Donatists: "I consider it absolutely contrary to the divine law that we should overlook such quarrels and contentions, whereby the Highest Divinity may perhaps be moved to wrath, not only against the human race, but also against me myself, to whose care He has, by His celestial will, committed the government of all earthly things.... For I shall really and fully be able to feel secure and always to hope for prosperity and happiness from the ready kindness of the most mighty God, only when I see all venerating the most holy God in the proper cult of the Catholic Religion with harmonious brotherhood of worship."

Constantine did not establish Christianity because Constantine, quite frankly, did not know what Christianity is. The legend of Constantine, which Constantine himself promoted, says that before the Battle of Milvian Bridge, he had seen a vision of a cross—but pagan Romans had seen visions for centuries. In fact, this was not the first vision Constantine had seen; he had earlier seen Apollo, who had guaranteed his earlier military victories. But at a feast concluding the Council of Nicaea in 325 (which he had summoned), Constantine first gave a public account—13 years after the fact—of the apparition he had experienced, and Eusebius, his obsequious biographer, reported it for us:

¹⁸ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, Book 10, paragraph 5.

“The Emperor said that about the noon hour, when the day was already beginning to wane, he saw with his own eyes in the sky above the Sun a cross composed of light, and that there was attached to it an inscription saying, ‘By this conquer.’ At the sight, he said, astonishment seized him and all the troops who were accompanying him on the journey and were observers of the miracle. He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep, the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard [a charm—JR] in all engagements with his enemies. At dawn of day, he arose, and communicated the marvel to his friends; and then, calling together the workers in gold and precious stones, he sat in the midst of them, and described to them the figure of the sign he had seen, bidding them represent it in gold and precious stones. And this representation I myself have had opportunity of seeing.”¹⁹

If indeed Constantine saw or heard something, it was a demonic vision and voice, not a word from God. Brown tells us that after his “conversion” “The first Christian emperor accepted pagan honours from the citizens of Athens. He ransacked the Aegean for pagan classical statuary to adorn Constantinople. He treated a pagan philosopher as a colleague. He paid the travelling expenses of a pagan priest who visited the pagan monuments of Egypt” (88). Sol Invictus, the pagan Sun god, was honored on Constantine’s coins until 321.

It was this man who is credited with making “Christianity” the lawful religion of the Empire, but Constantine, himself not knowing what Christianity is, turned to the Catholic bishops, who gave him various answers. That was intolerable. And for that reason, Constantine summoned councils in an attempt to unify the Empire theologically, just as he had unified it militarily in 324, when he defeated Licinius, his last rival for power. Councils assembled in response to his orders and those of subsequent emperors; and creedal formulations from the fourth century onward become the creedal formulations approved by the Roman Emperor. All who disagreed were banished from the Empire, or punished in more painful ways.

In 324, after defeating Licinius, Constantine pro-claimed himself head of the Catholic Church and summoned bishops to Nicaea for a council in which he himself would preside. Two hundred fifty obeyed. In another summons he wrote: “such is the regard I pay to the lawful Catholic Church that I desire you to leave no schism or division of any kind anywhere.”

Not only would the Emperor permit no disagreement (for there must be unity of doctrine to match the political unity of the Empire), he also began to subsidize the Catholic Church:

¹⁹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book 1, chapter 30.

“Inasmuch as I have resolved that in all provinces, namely Africa, Numidia, and Mauretania, certain named ministers of the lawful and most holy Catholic Religion should receive some contribution toward expenses, I have sent a letter to Ursus, the Eminent Finance Officer of Africa, informing him that he must arrange the transfer to Your Steadfastness [Caecilian, bishop of Carthage] of 3000 *folles* in cash [an enormous amount—JR]. Your task on receipt of this sum of money will be to see that it is distributed among all the persons named above according to the schedule supplied to you by Hosius [bishop of Corduba and religious adviser to Constantine]. If later you find that you still lack means to carry out my intentions in this matter in respect of them all, you must not hesitate to ask Heraclidas our treasurer for whatever you find necessary. I have given him orders in person that if Your Steadfastness should ask him for any sum, he is to arrange for its transfer to you without question.”²⁰ In 315 Constantine issued an edict making it a crime for Jews to proselytize. His goal in all this was to ensure that the “proper cult of the Catholic Religion” would be observed throughout the Empire: So much for every man being permitted to practice his religion as he chose. A century later, the penalty for Jewish proselytizing was made death.

Papal Rome

Fifteen centuries after the birth of Christ, little had changed in Western Europe but the names of the gods worshiped. The Western Europeans of the fifteenth century still lived in an enchanted world—a world of magic and miracles.

Instead of the twelve gods of ancient Rome, there were the cults of the twelve apostles, whose relics could cure diseases, control the weather, and inflict harm on those who opposed them.

Instead of the departmental deities of ancient Rome, there were the departmental Saints of papal Rome.

Instead of the cult of Diana, Queen of Heaven, there was the cult of Mary, Queen of Heaven.

The holidays,²¹ processions, sacrifices, and rituals continued; the apparitions, pilgrimages, relics, and shrines remained; the gladiatorial contests were replaced by *autos da fe* at which the religious would chant the *Psalms* and pray the liturgy. Laing wrote, “though there is a notable difference in the character of the supernatural beings that in the fourth century succeeded to the multitudinous functions of the old departmental spirits, there is little or no change in the attitude of mind....”

The founders of the Catholic Church-State “were keenly interested in winning the pagans to the faith, and they succeeded. But undoubtedly one element in their success was the inclusion in their system of the doctrine of the veneration of Saints. They seem to have felt that in order to make any headway at all, it was necessary for them to match the swarms of spirits available for the pagans with a

²⁰ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, Book 10, chapter 6.

²¹ In pre-Reformation Germany, there were 161 days of holy fasting and abstinence each year.

multitude of wonder-working Saints and Martyrs. How far they were prepared to go is indicated by their favorable attitude toward the pagan veneration of Virgil that amounted almost to deification.... The Saints succeeded to the worship of the dead just as they had succeeded to the cult of the departmental deities and to the little gods of the Roman household.... Reports of miracles wrought by human beings were common among the ancient Romans and were accepted by the great mass of people without question.... The [Roman] Christians adapted themselves to the pagan attitude. They matched the miracle-workers of the pagans with the wonder-working Saints; and with their success the number of miracles increased. The sanctity of relics, well established as it has been among the pagans, acquired far greater vogue in [medieval] Christian times and was given a degree of emphasis that it had never had before.... Like the deified heroes and emperors of pagan times, the Saints were honored with altars, sacred edifices, incense, lights, hymns, *ex-voto* offerings, festivals with illuminations and high hilarity, prayers, and invocations. They became intermediate divinities....²²

One Roman Catholic historian described the religion of early sixteenth-century Europe in these words:

"In 1509 when John Calvin was born, Western Christendom still shared a common religion of immanence. Heaven was never too far from Earth. The sacred was diffused in the profane, the spiritual in the material. Divine power, embodied in the [Roman] Church and its sacraments, reached down through innumerable points of contact to make itself felt: to forgive or punish, to protect against the ravages of nature, to heal, to soothe, and to work all sorts of wonders. Priests could absolve adulterers and murderers, or bless fields and cattle. During their lives, saints could prevent lightning from striking, restore sight to the blind, or preach to birds and fish. Unencumbered by the limitations of time and space, they could do even more through their images and relics after death. A pious glance at a statue of St. Christopher in the morning ensured protection from illness and death throughout the day. Burial in the habit of St. Francis improved the prospects for the afterlife. A pilgrimage to Santiago, where the body of the apostle James had been deposited by angels, or to Canterbury...could make a lame man walk, or hasten a soul's release from purgatory. The map of Europe bristled with holy places; life pulsed with the expectation of the miraculous. In the popular mind and in much of the official teaching of the [Roman] Church, almost anything was possible. One could even eat the flesh of the risen Christ in a consecrated wafer.

"Much of late medieval religion was magical, and...the difference between church men and magicians lay less in what they claimed they could do than in the authority on which their claims rested. This is illustrated by the crucifix that 'controlled' the weather at Tallard.... Late medieval piety showed an almost irrepressible urge to localize the

divine power, make it tangible, and bring it under control."²³

The Christian Reformation

The Survival of Roman Religion

It was not until the Christian Reformation of the sixteenth century that the Gospel of Jesus Christ freed Western Europe from the melange of pagan and Roman Church superstition that had prevailed during the Middle Ages. (The East never had a Reformation, and largely fell prey to Islam.) The popular religious literature in Europe in the fifteenth century was almost entirely devoted to the cult of Mary and the Saints. As for the less popular and more academic literature, one historian reported that "after 50 years, a lifetime of diligent searching, he had found nowhere in the fifteenth century a single defense of salvation either by faith alone or by sole reliance on external works and indulgences; everywhere salvation was rather conceived as coming only by the most sincere penance, active self-improvement, and recognition of God's grace."²⁴ It was this mongrel faith-works religion that the Christian Reformation of the sixteenth century abolished in much of Western Europe.

Church and State, Separated and Reformed

Martin Luther's courageous rejection—in the name of written revelation, logic, and freedom—of this faith-works religion laid the necessary theological foundation for the emergence of a free, humane, and civilized society from the ancient and medieval paganism of Christendom. The result was religious freedom and her daughters: political, civil, and economic freedom.

The first principle of the Reformation was divine, noncontradictory, propositional revelation. This is clearly seen in Luther's statement at his trial before the assembled officers of the Roman Church-State, the Diet of Worms, in April 1521:

"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the Word of God: I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience."²⁵

The Reformation began with a rejection of logical contradiction, not an embrace of it. The popes and councils had no authority—and could have no authority—because they contradicted themselves. Unlike many "Christian" theologians, who urge us to embrace contradiction, paradox, tension, antinomy, and mystery as

²² Laing, 8-9, 83, 120-121.

²³ Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*. Cambridge, 1986, 1, 11.

²⁴ Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities*. Yale, 1975, 16.

²⁵ See Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church. Volume VII: The German Reformation*, 304-305.

tokens and exemplars of divine truth,²⁶ Luther clearly understood that an authoritative Word from God must be clear and noncontradictory. Luther simply echoed the Apostle Paul: "For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?" (*1 Corinthians* 14:8). With his rejection of contradictory sources, Luther swept away centuries of pious religious nonsense.

But it was not simply on the rejection of contradiction that the Reformation rested; it rested on the Holy Scriptures, that is, the written revelation of God. The Bible alone is the noncontradictory revelation of God, and God has put all his revelation in writing. Luther so emphasized this idea that it became known as the *Schriftprinzip*: the writing principle. Here are some of Luther's statements of this fundamental principle, which he calls an "axiom" and a "first principle":

"We intend to glory in nothing but Holy Scripture, and we are certain that the Holy Spirit cannot oppose and contradict himself."

"I have learned to hold only the Holy Scripture inerrant. All other writings I so read that, however learned or holy they may be, I do not hold what they teach to be true unless they prove by Scripture or reason that it must be so."

"Putting aside all human writings, we should spend all the more and all the more persistent labor on Holy Scriptures alone.... Or tell me, if you can, who is the final judge when statements of the fathers contradict themselves? In this event the judgment of Scripture must decide the issue, which cannot be done if we do not give Scripture the first place...so that it [the Bible] is in itself the most certain, most easily understood, most plain, is its own interpreter, approving, judging, and illuminating all the statements of all men.... Therefore nothing except the divine words are to be the first principles for Christians; all human words are conclusions drawn from them and must be brought back to them and approved by them."

"Scripture itself...alone is the fount of all wisdom."

"And even in the writings of the fathers we should accept nothing that does not agree with Scripture. Scripture alone must remain the judge and master of all books."

Now the *Schriftprinzip* had profound and revolutionary effects on both thought and society. By recognizing the unique, axiomatic status of Holy Scripture, Luther de-divinized all other writings and traditions. Because they were not divinely inspired, they were of no authority in the church. This freed Christians in the West from the ecclesiastical tyranny that had lorded it over them for more than a thousand years. The "liberty of the Christian man" became a slogan of the Reformation, and the first liberty was freedom from the dictates of church leaders.

By recognizing that a text—the 66 books of the Bible breathed out by God, as *2 Timothy* 3:16 said—is the

²⁶ The list of theologians and schools of thought that teach this is long: One thinks immediately of the Neo-orthodox, but one must add mystics of all denominations; proponents of negative and analogical theology, including Thomists and Van Tilians; and some who claim to be Reformed, such as J. I. Packer.

Christian axiom, Luther's insight resulted in revolutionary changes in all of society: The Christian church now came under the rule of law, rather than the rule of men. That law—the written Word of God in its entirety—was public, permanent, unchanging, self-interpreting, and intended to be understood and believed by all Christians. That implied many things, some of which were

- (1) Each man was to read God's Word for himself—Luther never tired of pointing out that the letters of the New Testament are addressed to all Christians, not to an elite—and to make his own judgments, not relying on the authority of church leaders to tell him what to think, but solely on Scripture for its own interpretation.
- (2) This in turn required a literate populace, and universal, not elitist, education, became one of the major social reforms stemming from the Reformation.
- (3) Church officers held only ministerial, delegated authority, and Christ through his Word, the Bible, delegated that authority. Should they exceed that authority, their decisions were not binding on the conscience.
- (4) Both officers and institutions were to be judged by ordinary Christians as to whether they were obeying Scripture or exceeding the authority granted them by Scripture. The Reformers frequently appealed to such passages as *Acts* 17:11, *1 Corinthians* 10:15 and *1 Corinthians* 14:29, in which ordinary Christians are commanded to judge, and commended for judging, the words of apostles and prophets by the divinely inspired words of Scripture.
- (5) God's whole revelation was written in the 66 books of the Bible, to which nothing could be added, either by churchmen claiming ancient tradition or enthusiasts claiming new revelation.

The revolution first accomplished in the churches could not be confined to them, but quickly spread to civil governments. Not only was there a reduction in the power of churches in Protestant societies, but a reduction in the size and scope of government as well. For example, Steven Ozment reports that "when the Reformation was consolidated in Rostock in 1534, it brought not only an end to the privileges of the clergy but also government agreement to reduce its own numbers by about one-third," and to submit to a detailed annual accounting (122). Karl Holl, Professor of Church History at the University of Berlin (1906-1926), wrote, "...it was the Reformation that first set a rigid limit to the absolute power of the state."²⁷

The individual, for the first time in human history, was widely recognized as the direct creation of God, as the image of God, and as the redeemed of God. "The discovery of the doctrine of justification elevated the independence of the individual," wrote Holl (30). It was the individual person—the human soul—who was freed from

²⁷ *The Cultural Significance of the Reformation*, 1911, 53.

pagan and medieval tyranny by the Reformation, and from that freedom arose a free, humane, and civilized society.

Harold Berman argued that “the key to the renewal of law in the West from the sixteenth century on was the Protestant concept of the power of the individual, by God’s grace, to change nature and to create new social relations through the exercise of his will. The Protestant concept of the individual will became central to the development of the modern law of property and contract. Nature became property. Economic relations became contract.... The property and contract rights so created were held to be sacred and inviolable, so long as they did not contravene conscience.... And so the secularization of the state, in the restricted sense of the removal of ecclesiastical controls from it, was accompanied by a spiritualization, and even a sanctification, of property and contract” (64-65).

After Luther came Calvin: “Calvinism has also had profound effects upon the development of Western law, and especially upon American law. The Puritans carried forward the Lutheran concept of the sanctity of individual conscience²⁸ and also, in law, the sanctity of individual will as reflected in property and contract rights. [S]eventeenth century Puritans, including men like [John] Hampden, [John] Lilburne, [Walter] Udall, William Penn and others, by their disobedience to English law, laid the foundations for the English and American law of civil rights and civil liberties as expressed in our respective constitutions: freedom of speech and press, free exercise of religion, the privilege against self-incrimination, the independence of the jury from judicial dictation, the right not to be imprisoned without cause, and many other such rights and freedoms” (66-67).

The Reformation also recognized Christ’s distinction between God and Caesar (a distinction that had been denied or blurred in ancient and medieval societies, both East and West), and separated the institutions of church and state. The state did not receive its authority from or through the church—in *Romans* 13, Paul taught that civil governors received their authority directly from God, not from the pope—and the church did not receive its authority from or through the state—Christ had appointed a government for the church, with its own officers and authority, separate and distinct from civil government. The church was a complete institution in the first century, not one that was completed only by the accession of Constantine to power in the fourth century.

Economic Development

²⁸ “Luther also established freedom of conscience, whose defense he made an individual obligation, as a rational principle for the state.... The basic principle of Luther was taken up by his followers. It was observed at the very first opportunity that offered itself, the visitation in the Electorate of Saxony in 1527-8. On this occasion the Elector of Saxony explicitly renounced the forcible coercion of any subjects to his faith.... This occurrence in a small German territory had general historical significance. It was a departure from a tradition of more than a thousand years...” (Holl, 54). And so the Reformation began to undo the errors of Constantine.

It was the nations most greatly affected by the Reformation that ended slavery and serfdom first, not merely because they recognized the freedom of the Christian man and the priesthood of all believers, but also because they realized that all men are created in the image of God, and that no man is naturally the inferior of another. The Reformation caused a revolution in thought about the dignity of work, and work became a calling; good works became those tasks done in the pursuit of one’s vocation—not counting beads, lighting candles, or buying indulgences. The result was a spurt of economic activity that transformed Protestant countries, making them the most prosperous, inventive, and powerful nations on Earth.

In the nineteenth century it was a truism that the economic and political differences between nations were due to their different religions. In 1845, Charles Dickens, describing the stark difference between a Protestant Swiss canton and a Roman Catholic canton, wrote:

“On the Protestant side, neatness, cheerfulness, industry, education, continued aspiration after better things. On the Catholic side, dirt, disease, ignorance, squalor and misery. I have so constantly observed the like of this since I first came abroad, that I have a sad misgiving that the religion of Ireland lies at the root of all its sorrows.”²⁹

One mid-twentieth-century economic historian reported that “I have found, I repeat, no writer, Catholic or non-Catholic, who seriously disputed the claim that Protestant countries were generally more prosperous than Catholic ones.... There was almost universal agreement before [Max] Weber [wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*]...that there was a close historical association between Protestantism and the development of capitalism in its modern forms.”³⁰

An early twentieth-century historian listed six ways in which Protestantism gave birth to freedom and prosperity in Western Europe:

- (1) Protestantism permitted the intellect to be devoted to secular pursuits, not just religious;
- (2) Protestantism brought education to the masses;
- (3) Protestantism did not encourage indolence and distaste and disdain for labor as Roman Catholicism did;
- (4) Protestantism championed independence and individual responsibility;
- (5) Protestantism created a higher type of morality;
- (6) Protestantism fostered the separation of church and state.³¹

A new civilization was not Luther’s intention; at the beginning of the Reformation, he did not even contemplate organizing a new church, let alone a new society. But a new civilization was God’s intention. Luther’s first concern was the eternal salvation of his own

²⁹ Letter to Mr. Foster, quoted in Ernest Phillipps, *Papal Merchandise*. London, n.d., 169-170.

³⁰ Jacob Viner, *Religious Thought and Economic Society*, Durham, 1978, 182, 185.

³¹ Felix Rachfahl, “Kapitalismus und Calvinismus,” 1909.

soul, and God turned his terror into joy by showing him, from Scripture, the doctrine of the perfect, imputed righteousness of Christ received by faith alone. That doctrine was taught especially clearly in Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians.

In the sixteenth century, God caused the Gospel of justification by faith alone to be widely preached and believed in Western Europe, using Luther and Calvin and many others to accomplish his purpose of building his kingdom. Because the Gospel was widely believed, God blessed believers in Western Europe and America beyond anything they could have imagined, and his blessings spilled over into society at large, creating what we now call Western civilization. Christ had promised this in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

"Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: They neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"

"Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

All these things—the things we call Western civilization—were added to the European and American Christians, on an historically unprecedented scale, just as Christ had promised. And they were added because their priorities were straight: They sought first the Kingdom of God and his imputed righteousness, not their own righteousness or prosperity.

Judea Against Rome

Luther rejected the errors of Constantine and his successors in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. He wrote:

"It is with the Word that we must fight, by the Word we must overthrow and destroy what has been set up by violence. I will not make use of force against the superstitious and unbelieving.... No one must be constrained. Liberty is the very essence of faith.... I will preach, discuss, and write; but I will constrain none, for faith is a voluntary act.... God's Word should be allowed to work alone, without our work or interference. Why? Because it is not in my power to fashion the hearts of men as the potter molds the clay.... I can get no further than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot

put faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. That is God's work alone.... We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure."

Despite the enormous progress made in Western Europe and the United States since the sixteenth century, a resurgence of ancient and medieval paganism now threatens Western civilization. The paganism of Papal Rome made an unexpected resurgence in the twentieth century, and ancient Roman paganism is also in the ascendant.³² Among modern philosophers the nineteenth-century German Friedrich Nietzsche clearly understood the "revaluation of all [pagan] values" that Christianity represents. In his *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche wrote: "The symbol of this struggle, inscribed in letters legible across all human history, is 'Rome against Judea, Judea against Rome.' There has hitherto been no greater event than this struggle, this question, this deadly contradiction.... One has the right to link the salvation and future of the human race with the unconditional dominance of aristocratic values, Roman values...."³³

Nietzsche denied that man is the image of God:

"We no longer [after Darwin] derive man from 'the spirit' or 'the deity'; we have placed him back among the animals.... Man is by no means the crown of creation; every living being stands beside him on the same level of perfection."³⁴

Anticipating the neo-pagan environmental movement of the twentieth century, Nietzsche declared: "Our whole attitude toward nature, the way we violate her with the aid of machines and the heedless inventiveness of our technicians and engineers, is hubris...."³⁵

Nietzsche's Antichristian, anti-capitalist, aristocratic paganism was a factor in the eruption of political and economic paganism in the twentieth century. He "welcome[d] all signs that a more manly, a warlike, age is about to begin, an age which, above all, will give honor to valor once again."³⁶

That warlike age began in the twentieth century, and it shows no signs of ending in the twenty-first. Instead, resurgent medieval religions of Catholicism, Orthodox-ism, and Islam are being added to the revival of ancient paganism in the twentieth century. God alone can prevent their bloody triumph, and if he does so, it will be by means

³² Some of the most popular novels of the late twentieth century were written by medievalists, and their action is set in enchanted fantasy worlds that recall the worlds of ancient and medieval paganism. These novels, sometimes praised by reviewers as Christian allegories, are devoid of Christian figures and ideas, and their authors explicitly deny that they are Christian stories.

³³ First Essay, section 16.

³⁴ *The Antichrist*, section 14. Contrast Nietzsche with Calvin, who wrote: "Men themselves...are the most illustrious ornament and glory of the Earth. If they should fail, the Earth would exhibit a scene of desolation and solitude, not less hideous than if God should despoil it of all its other riches" (*Commentary on Psalm 24*).

³⁵ *The Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay, section 9.

³⁶ *The Gay Science*, 283.

that have always confounded the world: He will once again cause the Gospel of justification by faith alone to be widely preached and believed. But whatever God's plans may be for our immediate future—bloody religious wars between false religions, or the emergence of a peaceful, free, and humane civilization through the widespread preaching and belief of the Gospel—we can be assured that his Kingdom will continue to grow, just as he promised through his prophet Daniel, 2,600 years ago, not by human hands, but by his righteousness alone.

Forthcoming Books

- *What Calvin Says*, second edition, W. Gary Crampton
- *Christian Philosophy*, a combined edition of *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*; *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*; and *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, all by Gordon Clark, in the Signature Series of *The Works of Gordon Clark*
- *Proud of the Gospel, Essays in Defense of the Faith* (working title), John Robbins

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