PART 3

FROM CHRISTENDOM TO EUROPE

Chapter Eight

THE BIRTH OF CHRISTENDOM

Rescue – and rescue again

At two critical points in its history, the Roman Empire was given an outstanding pair of leaders, one effectively succeeding the other in each case. The first of these leaders was Julius Caesar. As the Roman Republic was disintegrating, he overcame rivals such as Pompey to become dictator in 48 BC. More than just an inspired general, he could see how to restore Rome and take her on to greatness. Lacking the requisite wisdom for the task, though, he was assassinated (44 BC), before he'd had time to put his plans into effect. After another struggle for power, his nephew and heir, Octavian – Caesar Augustus – became the first official Emperor. An extraordinary man with a wide range of gifts, Octavian held sole power from 31 BC to AD 14. Julius Caesar's vision – supplemented by his own – Caesar Augustus turned into reality, and in his time Rome became almost as extensive an empire as it ever would be.

By the later 200s the Empire was close to collapse, both economically and militarily. Economically, tax revenue was insufficient for vital military expenditure, and inflation out of control. Militarily, external pressure along much of the Empire's too-extensive borders was matched by internal uprisings. If anything was going to be done, it would have to be the army that did it. But, by now, the army was largely composed of, and led by, 'barbarians' – very capable 'barbarians', as it turned out. And the centre of real (i.e. military) power in the Empire had shifted to Illyricum (modern Yugoslavia). In 284, a revolutionary officers' council elected one of their number, Diocletian, commander of the imperial bodyguard, to build a renewed Empire out of the chaos left by fifty years of near anarchy. John Holland Smith in *Constantine the Great* says of

Diocletian's predecessors, and about the man himself and his co-leaders: 'the majority were little better than bandits whose terrorism had been legalised by the grant of military commissions and whose survival depended on their forcefulness, not their blood'[1]. Yet Diocletian had a great sense of duty, as well as considerable ability; and he chose a highly competent team. He ruled the Empire with the help of three friends, military colleagues, dividing it into East and West, each part being divided into two regions. Diocletian himself was the senior Caesar Augustus of two, and based himself in Asia Minor (modern western Turkey). His counterpart in the West was Maximian, whose capital was at Milan. Responsibility for the Eastern Empire Diocletian shared with a most unpleasant character, Galerius, who ruled as a junior Caesar from what is now Mitrovica in Yugoslavia. Finally, the junior Caesar in the West, Constantius, operated out of Trier (in Germany, near Luxembourg).

This militarily competent police-state was strengthened by being given an effective administrative framework, and by an attempt being made to run it on more economically realistic lines. Diocletian was, in many ways, a Romanised-barbarian version of the truly-Roman Caesar Augustus. It is testimony to the competence of his team of four that it survived intact until Diocletian retired in 305. Despite his being a barbarian, and the fact that he and his team were given to tasteless displays of wealth and grandeur, Diocletian was committed to Rome's traditional concept of herself. And as Rome had always understood her security to be based on the favour of her gods, so these would have to be honoured and worshipped aright – by everyone. But there were groups, like the fast-growing Christian sect, whose intransigent behaviour was incompatible with these pagan commitments of his. In 303 he ordered a systematic persecution of the Church across the Empire (having acted against several other groups first). The persecution was prosecuted much more vigorously in the East, where the Church was stronger, than the West; but it could never 'work' in the way Diocletian intended.

[1] 1971; London; Hamish Hamilton; SBN 241 01909 9; p4.

Constantine

Constantius, the junior Caesar in north western Europe (as it is now), was a civilised, diligent and effective general, who brought order to a highly troublesome region. By his first (unofficial?) wife, Helena, he had a son, Constantine, for who he seems to have had real affection, and whose considerable ability he clearly recognised. When promotion came his way, he needed (was persuaded?) – for political reasons – to give up Helena and marry Theodora, adopted daughter of Maximian, his new boss (to 'bring him into the family')[2]. Constantius' marriage to Theodora was clearly a happy one, and one of their daughters, intriguingly, they named Anastasia. Intriguingly, because Anastasia – 'Resurrection' – was a name used by Christians; though neither parent was a believer. What we do know, though, is that Constantius was appreciated by those he ruled and led – and was all but unwilling to persecute the Christians (when supposed to), seemingly having real sympathy for them.

When Diocletian sent for young Constantine to be educated at his court, it was as much to hold him hostage – to ensure his father's loyalty – as to train him up in imperial ways: there was little trust between the four top men. The boy was no scholar, but he had considerable native wit. Given his enormous size as a grown man, Constantine must have cut quite a figure as a teenager. His giftedness evidently aroused jealousy at court. For some reason unknown to us, the Christian scholar Eusebius, librarian at Caesarea, noticed him, and was duly impressed. (Eusebius would later become Bishop of Caesarea, and an important mentor to, and ally of, Constantine).

On May 1st, 305, Diocletian and Maximian abdicated (in Maximian's case, against his better judgement). The unpleasant Galerius became Augustus in the East

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[2] It was virtually part of the culture in the Roman Empire for men with ambition to take an unofficial wife in their teens, whom they would then set aside when they needed – for career reasons – to contract an advantageous marriage to a well-connected woman.

(the senior of the two), and Constantius the Augustus in the West. Constantius' son Constantine was an obvious choice as one of the two new junior Caesars, but for some reason (too much power in one family?) was passed over. The Christians seem to have been among his strong supporters and, in an area where the Church was strong and Christianity vigorously persecuted, this may have counted against him. According to one account, Galerius felt threatened by him, and could see only trouble for himself if Constantine were chosen – not without reason, it would seem, in the light of the young man's future behaviour. In the event, Diocletian – although he seems to recognised Constantine's giftedness – was prevailed upon to choose two quite unsuitable candidates, Severus and Maximin Daia. (The latter would prove a particularly bitter enemy of the Christians). But Diocletian was no fool. He knew the way things worked at the top level in the Empire: those not up to the job wouldn't last very long, and more able leaders would prevail. Constantine, though, trapped as he was in Galerius' court, was in trouble. Constantius, by now in poor health, knew that sooner or later, if his son remained where he was, he'd have an 'accident' and disappear from the scene. For his part, Galerius feared that if Constantine were able to join his father, they'd stage a coup. Somehow, Constantine escaped. He was with his father in York when Constantius died on July 25th, 306. Almost immediately, the troops in York – provocatively – acclaimed Constantine not only Caesar but Augustus too. How much this was pre-arranged, and how much it was spontaneous, isn't known – but the event is commemorated on a stone just outside York Minster[3].

Diplomatically – and at a distance! – Constantine negotiated with Galerius to be recognised merely as junior Caesar in the West, and heir of no more than his father's quarter of the Empire. It turned out to be in Galerius' overall interest to grant this, and the rest of the Empire proved content with the arrangement.

[3] That city's magnificent cathedral.

Soon afterwards, in October 306, Maximian's son, Maxentius – who had been passed over for promotion to Caesar at the same as Constantine (and perhaps for similar reasons) – rose up in Rome, with the help of the Praetorian Guard[4], against the new Augustus in the West, Severus. He was exploiting two grievances, one about a plan to tax Italy, and the other relating to the threatened disbandment of the Praetorians. Maximius came out of retirement to help his son. Severus had no answer. But then Maximian turned against Maxentius, and sought to supplant him. When this failed, he turned to Constantine for protection. Meanwhile, staying in the safety of his own territory, Constantine would help neither Galerius, as he marched from the East to defeat Maxentius and recover Rome for the Empire, nor Maxentius. Galerius lost his nerve before reaching Rome – unwilling perhaps to have Constantine and his army at his rear as he went after Maxentius – and retreated back to the East.

Constantine now had the psychological advantage. Even so, he bided his time and patiently secured his position in the North West. He seems to have been driven – or led on – by a sense of destiny. In 309 he was in Autun (near Dijon, in France), where he consulted the oracle at Apollo's temple, and left magnificent offerings for the god. By this time, Apollo was commonly seen as a manifestation of Sol Invictus, or Helios, the Unconquered Sun. Sol Invictus was the deity Constantine worshipped: he was in no sense a Christian at this point. But in 311, Bishop Hosius, from Cordoba in southern Spain, and Lactantius, a Christian historian from the Eastern Empire, paid Constantine a visit in Trier. For whatever reason, the hopes of the Christians rose as a result of this meeting.

Having played his cards most astutely for six years, in 312 Constantine was ready to march on Rome. Maxentius, his opponent, wasn't just openly immoral (Constantine was a bit of a puritan himself), he had the reputation of being a great magician with occult power over the pagan gods. Perhaps it was the need

[4] Originally the Emperor's personal guard – but, latterly, the on-the-spot power brokers in Rome, and pretty-much out of control.

to counter this that prompted Constantine to seek the help of the Christians' obviously-very-powerful god. At some stage prior to the battle against Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge across the River Tiber just to the north of Rome – the details are shrouded in mystery – Constantine had a vision. Apparently he was looking at the sun, saw a cross-shape of some sort, and heard or saw the words: "In this sign conquer!" He had a battle-standard made in the cross-shape he'd seen and, from then on, had all his men paint this 'cross' on their shields. (In due course, if not at the beginning, the shape would become the Chi-Rho symbol – an X overlaid with a P). Perhaps he used the new symbol before he reached Rome. Anyway, at the Milvian Bridge (Oct 28th, 312) it seemed to overcome all Maxentius' magical power (Constantine, anyway, was convinced it had). For some reason, Maxentius, quite unnecessarily leaving the relative safety of the city, crossed the Milvian Bridge with his troops, thus having to fight with his back to the river (never a good move). Constantine duly drove his opponents into the river. The whole of the Western Roman Empire was now in his power. He was well on the way to becoming the second of the pair of powerful emperors, virtual successor to Diocletian.

The start of a new order of things

Constantine began promoting Christianity vigorously, whilst ensuring that pagans weren't persecuted. The Roman Empire had been built on proper respect for her gods, and the right worship of them. This was taken with the utmost seriousness: the Empire's very existence was believed to depend on it. That's why Diocletian and his associates had persecuted the Christians so severely – they compromised Rome's worship of her gods, and hence her security. But Constantine knew better than his predecessors. It was the god of the Christians that had the power to save (i.e. deliver victory in battle). So it was this god, to whom he had recently given his allegiance, which Rome should now begin to honour and worship aright.

As part of his considerable generosity to the Church, Constantine gave the palace on the Lateran Hill at the southern edge of Rome to the city's new bishop, Melitiades. This would be the papal residence for more than a thousand years. Beside it would be constructed what is still Rome's cathedral (although rebuilt since then), St John Lateran. In February 313, Constantine met his Eastern Empire counterpart, Licinius[5], in Milan to finalise details of an alliance between them. Persecution was still severe in the East, unlike in the West, and Constantine insisted that Licinius agree a policy of toleration towards Christians. The edict of Milan, proclaiming toleration, was promulgated at their meeting.

In the Western Empire, Constantine not only instructed that Christian property confiscated during the persecution be restored to its owners, he extended to Christian ministers the privileges, such as immunity from taxation and conscription, already enjoyed by pagan priests. An unintended consequence of this was the considerable speeding up of the development of a 'priestly caste' within the Church (which was already in process of forming).

A split had occurred some years previously in the Church in North Africa, when the Donatists had separated from the Catholic Church – on a persecution-related issue – and set up a rival, and highly popular, church system. In 314, in an attempt to deal with the situation, Constantine called a Council of senior church leaders at Arles in Southern France to adjudicate. He wanted a united Church, so that the god of the Christians – whom he'd started to regard as his god – might be properly honoured and worshipped. But he was also a man who needed to have complete control of what he regarded as his business. Diocletian's paranoid, pagan police state Constantine was in the process of turning into his own paranoid, Christianised police state. At Arles, although not even a baptised Christian, he made himself the chairman of the Church's business – before the Church had grasped the significance of what was happening.

[5] Galerius having died in the meantime.

Because he'd shifted the Church's situation from persecution and marginalisation to one of freedom and official favour, and because he was starting to bring in laws based on Christian principles, it's easy to see why the Church wasn't inclined to stand up to him[6]. And, anyway, he seemed like another King David. But Constantine's attempt to impose unity on the Church failed – and, in failing, it helped ensure that he lost the struggle for the hearts and minds of his people. The Donatist dissidents had both the army and the Catholic (i.e. mainstream) Church against them, yet their numbers kept growing, convinced as they and their sympathisers were that Constantine was just one more persecuting emperor.

But Constantine remained firm in his refusal to persecute paganism. Deep down, he seems to have shared his father's tolerant streak. But he lived in times when serious trouble could erupt from any number of possible directions – and emperors couldn't afford to make even one significant mistake. The sheer precariousness of Constantine's position – and, with his own, the Empire's - needs to be understood. In fact, Constantine was tolerant towards paganism simply because he could afford to be: it was, even before his time, on the way out. But, personally, he was less and less prepared to compromise with it, and became quite happy to insult pagans and their practices. Although he always knew how to stay on top of a situation, he was ensuring that getting his own way would become increasingly difficult; because if paganism as an influence had lost its power, many individual pagans were still very influential people.

By 315 Constantine controlled Eastern Europe and the western end of North Africa. On coins minted in Rome he was 'the Liberator of the World' (!) and, more disturbingly, 'the Companion of the Unconquered Sun'. (Only gradually did his life become Christianised, and it would be some time before the sun disappeared from his coinage). He faced two challenges in particular: first, the economy; and,

[6] The Church of the twentieth century hardly had a good record when it came to relating to political leaders of the sort who would almost inevitably compromise her integrity.

secondly, the establishing of his power and authority long-term. Although he never managed to overcome the damaging inflation relating to the Empire's copper coinage, he did manage to establish a degree of economic stability. This he achieveded by developing a first-class bureaucracy (backed up by police-state control), taxing people to the realistic limit, and establishing a credible gold currency. His gold coin, the *solidus*, would be the standard for Byzantine (Eastern Empire) and European (Western) currencies for more than a thousand years. His civil service, about as strong, numerically, as his army, survived as the 'mandarin' Byzantine civil service until Byzantium finally fell to the Turks in 1453. Constantine paid as much attention to detail as to the big picture[7], and what he did tended to last! As regards power and authority, he moved his (Western) capital as far east as Serdica (Sophia in Bulgaria) in 317-8. This could be justified by Western strategic considerations, but the fact was that he wanted Licinius in his sights, and Licinius knew it. In 323, Constantine effectively picked a fight with him and defeated him. Captured, not killed, in battle, Licinius died in mysterious circumstances soon afterwards.

When it came to the Church, though, Constantine's attempt at domination was less effective than he'd hoped. Even so, the Catholic Church did co-operate with him extensively on the basis of perceived mutual interest. This generated a problem: whatever the theory, in practice 'Catholic Christians' was now Christians who were loyal to their Emperor's concept of a united Empire. In other words, it was obedience to the State that defined what the 'true' Church was (and would do in many periods of history to come). This, of course, was a denial of what the Church had stood for until that time. The reward for Catholic bishops was that they became senior civil servants, with the extensive privileges that that involved. Constantine can be said both to have bought the (Catholic) Church and to have bullied it. What the Church demonstrated was that it no longer knew how, in key areas, to behave either wisely or in accordance with basic Christian principles. Constantine, of course, wasn't the problem: the Church was the

[7] A rare quality in a leader.

problem. Caesar had been preferred to Christ (Mt 22:21). And the damage done to Christianity at that time has yet to be fully repaired.

Assessing Constantine, the man, is no easy task. He was, without doubt, one of the architects of the Western world – and consequently, one of the key figures in world history. Was he ever really a Christian? Well, he never had anything like an evangelical conversion. But it seems unnecessary to see him as simply a calculating individual, cynically using the Christian cause for his own ends – although, inevitably, he did have to calculate, and calculate successfully. The evidence suggests that he genuinely gave his allegiance to the Christians' God – without in any way 'knowing him'. This allegiance was more rooted in superstition and the seeming magical power associated with Christ than true belief. Yet something about him had impressed Christian leaders, before his 'conversion', from his youth onwards. What was that? We'd love to know. And his father, with whom he had a friendly relationship, had protected Christians and given his daughter a name that Christians used for their children. Something was going on in the background there. It was Constantine who persuaded his amazing mother Helena to join the Church – which she did, with all the enthusiasm of a convert. Although he wouldn't submit to the Church's discipline himself, he saw himself as part of its life: at first as 'the bishop of those outside' the Church, and later as 'the equal of the apostles'. And Constantine lived a sexually pure life, according to most accounts[8]. That he wasn't baptised until his deathbed isn't entirely surprising. He may have heard a strong line taken, on which sins committed after baptism wouldn't be forgiven – and being Emperor had always been an exceedingly messy business. Anyway, he'd expressed a desire – never fulfilled – to be baptised in the Jordan. What would convince me personally of a truly Christian spark within Constantine, if nothing else did, was something he wrote to 'his bishops' in 315 concerning the Donatist controversy:

[8] Although there are suggestions of looser behaviour in his later years – but these have to be assessed in the light of a propaganda campaign against Constantine by his opponents.

> I draw much the same conclusion from my own case. For at the outset, there was much in me that seemed lacking in righteousness, and I did not believe that there was any power above who could see into the secret recesses of my heart, and the thoughts nurtured there … But God almighty, enthroned in heaven, has granted me what I did not deserve: blessings innumerable …

There was, though, another side to the man. John Holland Smith sums it up thus:

> Until late in life he may have been virile and vigorous, but he was also frightening, because his strength went with a temper that rested on a knife-edge and anger brought out a streak of cruelty in him …[As a new Caesar, who had had to put down a revolt in northern Gaul] he came under attack for condemning prisoners to mortal combat with wild beasts in the amphitheatres of Trier and Colmar[9]; five years after that, he attempted to wipe out all opposition in North Africa by ruthless annihilation of all dissidents, and early in his reign as sole emperor, in 326-7, he executed his eldest son, his own second wife, his favourite sister's husband and, in the words of one chronicler 'many others', on a variety of doubtfully proven charges. He was, as Eusebius claims, naturally intelligent, but such wisdom as he displayed in personal relationships at any rate had little of the divine in it. He was in fact an overbearing man, egotistical and self-righteous, ruthless in gaining his ends, dangerous to oppose, generally alert, but susceptible to flattery, although not as open to it as many weaker emperors had been.[10]

All that said, there does seem to have been change in him away from the old Constantine and towards more mellow – and more Christian – ways in his later years. But he never really seems to have left behind his devotion to the Unconquered Sun. Although he made the Christians' special day, 'Sunday' (the day dedicated to the sun), a day of rest, he made clear that his motive for doing this was respect for the sun. And the choice of December 25th (the winter solstice, and the day on which Rome honoured the Unconquered Sun) for the

[9] Literally thousands of them died in this way, but there are no estimates of just how many. The revolt broke treaties which the tribes concerned had entered into with his father Constantius – treaties with Rome, not personal agreements, of course – and this may have encouraged him to take such drastic action. But his behaviour contrasts with that of his father and of Diocletian, who both showed that cruelty and the satisfaction of blood-lust constituted no necessary part of being a successful emperor.

[10] *Constantine the Great*, p27.

celebration of Christ's birth may have come from the same motivation, depending on who was that made the decision (we don't know). If Constantine, then it's probably evidence of his unconvertedness. If the Church, then it was likely an attempt to substitute a Christian festival for a pagan one – which would become general church policy.

The emergence of the first Christendom

'Constantine favoured Christianity among the many religions of his subjects, but did not make it the official or "established" religion of the Empire,' says Henry Chadwick[11]. The Christian myth, misleadingly, has taught us the opposite: that he did. But he did turn the mainstream Church into something akin to a state church, and ensured that it had a body of canon law under which uniformity of belief and practice could be enforced. This wasn't the same thing as Christendom, but it was an indispensable precondition for Christendom to come into being. Constantine died in 337. We may date the start of Christendom proper to 390, when Ambrose, bishop of Milan, managed to get the Emperor Theodosius under his control. Christendom actually came into being through the action of the Church, not the Empire.

Some commentators and schools of thought effectively blame Constantine for Christendom: it was his project, and it's his fault. But, as I've suggested above, the Church was the problem. It's for the Church to defend the purity and integrity of the Christian faith, as much as it is to practice it and promote it. Why did it let Constantine have so much influence? The most obvious answer can be read in contemporary accounts of his times: his arrival on the scene was regarded as intervention form heaven. If this is understandable enough, then what had happened to the Church's spiritual warning bells? Answer: the Church had long before been infiltrated by the (unhealthy) spirit of Rome, just as it had been by

[11] *The Early Church*, p127.

the (unhealthy) Greek spirit[12]. Constantine was more part of a process that had been underway well before he arrived on the scene than the initiator of anything fundamentally new – and it's that process we need to understand; because otherwise we address the symptoms rather than the underlying cause.

THE HEAVY HAND   Constantine was succeeded by his three sons. Of these, Constantius II, who ruled in the East (337-61) proved the survivor, as the internal stability of the Empire, which Constantine had secured, began to disintegrate. Almost as soon as Constantine was dead, his sons started to persecute paganism. Constantius came to exercise authority at a point when debate in the Church about the character and relationship of Christ's humanity and divinity was raging – where the majority adhered to the 'liberal' thinking of Arius, a priest from Alexandria, and a minority to that of Athanasius, a bishop from the same Egyptian metropolis. Athanasius' high view of Christ's divinity would eventually prevail in mainstream expressions of Christianity, but this was far from obvious in the period we're talking about[13]. Athanasius had been condemned by the Eastern Church as a heretic at the end of Constantine's reign. He was now, however, being befriended by Julius, Bishop of Rome. Not only was Julius welcoming a heretic, in Eastern eyes, but Rome, acting as though it was the Church's court of appeal, proclaimed it was overturning Athanasius' condemnation for heresy. Not only did the Eastern Church (i.e. the Greek Orthodox) not recognise any superior Roman jurisdiction, the Greeks despised the intellectual – and so the theological – ability of the Western Church. A split actually took place temporarily between East and West, but strong imperial pressure led to reunion. Constantius wanted a settlement of the bitter Arian-Athanasian conflict in the Church on more-or-less Arian terms. This became

[12] As well as the unhealthy spiritual influences associated with Greece and Rome, there are also greatly-helpful, healthy ones. Too often today 'Greece' and 'Rome' are just seen as problems – this is to fail to identify between the 'redemptive gift' (as it's been called) of a nation, and the perversion of that gift.

[13] The various controversies about Christ's person are beyond the scope of this book. This one, though, is of particular significance. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, covers all the important controversies in their historical context. The study of the person of Christ is known as Christology (to be distinguished from 'crystallography', which is the study of the structures of crystals).

increasingly more difficult to achieve, because the Arian party was growing steadily weaker as Athanasius and his supporters gained influence. The Arians had lost their wheeling-dealing leader, Eusebius of Nicomedia, by this point. The hardline Athanasius – a difficult man – had, for his part, come to realise that allying with those who essentially agreed with him, but used different terminology, was way ahead.

Stuart Murray in his *Post-Christendom* points out the thoroughly unchristian way in which disagreement was expressed, and debate conducted, at this time: 'Bishops used Constantius' palace as their headquarters, and the partnership between church and state flourished. This was a period of intense theological controversy: divisions in the pre-Christendom churches paled beside the vitriolic debates of the early Christendom years.'[14] The unhealthy Church-state partnership bore at least some responsibility for this unacceptable behaviour on the part of church leaders and their partisan supporters. And the tendency to leave behind any trace of Christian charity and civility when ideological conflict arose in the Church has still to be fully purged from among us. (But the modern, supposedly-more-enlightened way of declining debate, and ignoring others who disagree with us, is only slightly less disturbing. We need to learn how to disagree and, if need be, to agree to disagree, in a properly Christian way. I'm not suggesting, in all this, though, that there's never a time for strong words.)

At this time the Church experienced rapid numerical growth. The long and demanding initiation process, leading up to baptism, couldn't cope. So it was simplified and shortened. Consequently the Church began to fill up with adherents many of whom weren't fully aware of what Christianity was supposed to involve, let alone converted. The problem of nominal Christianity had begun – and the door had been thrown wide open for the general 'membership' of the Church to have two religious lives: an officially Christian one, and an unofficial

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[14] 2004; Bletchley, UK / Waynesboro, GA, USA; Paternoster Press / Authentic Media; ISBN 1-84227-261-6; p39.

pagan one in parallel with it. Syncretism – the mixing of more than one religion – was becoming the way of the majority (as has so often been the case with Islam).

A RETURN TO PAGANISM The arrival on the scene of Julian as Emperor, on Constantius' death in 361, cut across all this. Julian had had a Christian upbringing and a good general education. He specialised in theological studies, was baptised, and became a 'reader' in the Church. But in his late teens he started to take a serious interest in paganism and magic. By 351 he'd secretly abandoned Christianity. The behaviour of his cousin Constantius II, to whom he became a junior Caesar, seems to have generated in him a positive hostility towards the Christian faith. David Shotter in *Rome and her Empire* reckons: 'Constantius II, even allowing for the propaganda that emanated from Julian, may justly be regarded as authoritarian and cruel; he dominated his court, and his reign, by that very authoritarianism, saw the undermining of the religious equilibrium which had been achieved by his father.'[15] On becoming Emperor, Julian cast off all pretence about his religious sympathies. He was unperturbed when pagans lynched a Christian leader who had strong anti-pagan views. He discriminated against Christians when making high-level appointments in the civil administration and the army. But he had no intention of making Christian martyrs unnecessarily. Despite holding Judaism in all but contempt, he came up with a proposal calculated to win the support of the Jews and offend the Christians: sacrifices would be restored in a rebuilt temple at Jerusalem, around which would be created a territorial area in Palestine, to be administered by the Jewish patriarch. The alliance which this prompted between an apostate Emperor and Judaism further alienated the Christian community from the Jews, whose cooperation with anti-Christian governments during the years of persecution was still keenly remembered.

Although Julian's reign was short, his importance lies in his attempt to re-launch paganism. It didn't work. It couldn't work. Julian himself was utterly committed –

[15] p 426

at a spiritual level – to paganism. But his preaching and propaganda on its behalf simply caused embarrassment. He made himself look ridiculous. Most of the pagan allegiance that still existed was tied to tradition, not based on any religious conviction or enthusiasm. So many animals were being killed for sacrifice that the meat trade was affected in some areas. The Emperor wanted to institute a pagan priesthood which would live in such a way as to command public respect, preach, and organise works of charity. But it was important to demonstrate to the people the rightness of his cause. So, guided by the mediums he was accustomed to consult, he launched a campaign against the Persians. The old gods, the true givers of victory, would be vindicated. On 23 June 363, however, he died in battle – and his cause with him.

TOLERATION Valentinian I (364-75), Julian's successor in the West, read accurately the mood of the times. He not only opted for a policy of religious toleration, he virtually enforced one. Valens (364-78), his brother, ruling the East from Constantinople, was happy enough to favour the Arian bishops his wife supported, and mildly to persecute those who wouldn't work with them. But this kind of action couldn't compensate for the shift of support to the Athanasian party. So if Valens wasn't actually tolerant, his attempts to intervene in church affairs were rendered virtually ineffective. This interim period wasn't destined to last.

CHURCH-SPONSORED CHRISTENDOM 'The main architect in the West of the concept of an orthodox empire from which religious error would be excluded (or would at least reduce its holder to the status of a second-class citizen) was Ambrose of Milan,' says Henry Chadwick in *The Early Church*[16]:

> Ambrose was in many respects a typical figure of the social and political situation in the last quarter of the fourth century. The son of a praetorian prefect at Trier, he had embarked on a legal and administrative career, rising speedily to the rank of provincial governor of Milan [the capital of the Western Empire]. In 374, on the death

[16] p166

> of the Arian Auxentius, he was chosen bishop by overwhelming popular acclamation, even though he had not yet been baptised. Baptised by a non-Arian senior priest, a week later he was ordained to the episcopate. He quickly came to exercise a progressive influence upon the religious policy of the Western emperors Gratian, Valentinian II, and Theodosius. In 382 Gratian removed the Altar of Victory from the Senate House [in Rome] (leaving untouched, however, the statue of Victoria which Christian senators could happily treat as an angel). The wealthy pagan aristocracy, led by Symmachus, had to suffer the slight until Gratian's death (he was murdered in 383); but in 384 Symmachus addressed an eloquent plea to the youthful new emperor Valentinian II, asking for the restoration of the Altar as a symbol of all that had made Rome great and for a policy of toleration, since "it is not possible by only one road to attain to so great a mystery". Ambrose wrote a reply that successfully stayed Valentinian's hand. In 385 Ambrose mobilised the populace at Milan of Valentinian I's widow Justina that one of the Milanese churches be handed over to the use of the Arian Goths in the army, an act that in Ambrose's eyes would have meant the profanation of a consecrated building. In 388 a synagogue at Callinicus on the Euphrates was burnt by Christian zealots, and Theodosius ordered the local bishop to make restitution in full from church funds. By a dramatic refusal to proceed with the Eucharistic liturgy until Thedosius yielded, Ambrose persuaded the emperor (against his better judgement) to revoke the restitution order. More creditable to Ambrose was his bold excommunication of Theodosius in 390 for a hot-tempered decision to massacre thousands of citizens in the circus at Thessalonica after they had killed a barbarian army commander. Ambrose required the emperor to accept public penance before restoration to communion, and thereby enforced the point that the concern of the church extends to actions contrary to natural law and repugnant to humanity, not merely to its own private interests.[17]

There's reason to believe, Chadwick says, that there's some connection between the succession of edicts against paganism that would be issued by the imperial chancery from 391 onwards, and the dominance Ambrose established over Theodosius in 390. The state was now the weaker partner in a Church-state alliance, and acting in support of the Church's agenda – which didn't bode well for the future.

[17] pp 167,8

Ambrose isn't just important in his own right, for who was and what he did, but as the person who helped Augustine of Hippo to faith and exercised a decisive influence over him. But before we look at Augustine, it's important to say something about a controversial bishop of Rome from around the same time.

POPE DAMASUS (366-84) As with what we know of Ambrose's ministry, the accounts we have of Pope Damasus are most revealing. When Pope Liberius was exiled (355-8), two factions came into being, which, when he died, became locked in bitter conflict. The rival parties each elected a bishop, Ursinus and Damasus. A riot ensued, in which 137 people lost their lives. With the support of his friend, the city prefect, Damasus won the struggle for power. But when a new city prefect had to deal with an accusation of homicide against him, Damasus was in trouble. Only help from wealthy friends, and the Emperor's personal intervention on his behalf, allowed him to evade the natural course of justice. If his moral position was now extremely weak, he compensated for this by exercising his secular power, and by emphasising ideas which had been developed over the years about the Pope's elevated spiritual dignity as St Peter's successor.

The bishops of the great cities in the Empire had for some time been moving up the social scale. Damasus appreciated the life of high society. His entertaining was said to have been more lavish than the Emperor's. He gained a reputation for being a ladies' man. Chadwick points out the seemingly positive side of this: 'He did as much as any fourth-century Pope to make it natural for the great upper-class families of Rome to turn to Christianity without feeling that they were doing something disreputable and un-Roman. The ladies were converted first, but the men long tended to remain pagan.'[18] This was no small achievement. The question is, of course: Was this the work of the Kingdom, done by Kingdom methods?

[18] *The Early Church*; p 161.

‘It was the achievement of Damasus to fuse the old Roman civic and imperial pride with Christianity.’ Chadwick again. ‘Constantine had in one sense begun the fusion when he built the noble basilicas to St Peter and St Paul on the shrines associated with the apostles since at least 160-70. Recent excavations under St Peter’s have discovered a pagan necropolis [burial site] of the second century A.D., in the middle of which there stood a monument in honour of St Peter built in that decade.’[19] Chadwick’s conclusion is of some significance: ‘The rich adornment which Damasus lavished on martyrs’ shrines and the stress on the founding apostles asserted a claim that the real glory of Rome was not pagan but Christian. In one epigram which reflects East-West tension during the Arian controversy, Damasus remarked that “although the East sent the apostles, yet because of the merit of their martyrdom Rome has acquired a superior right to claim them as citizens”. Under the potent patronage of the apostles who were intimate with Christ, the city could be assured of security and of a more lasting grandeur than the old gods. Like his predecessor Liberius, Damasus speaks self-consciously of Rome as “the apostolic see” [a ‘see’ being a bishop’s base and the area served by that bishop].’[20]

The foundation-claims of what we know as Roman Catholicism were being developed here. Note that they don’t start with a biblical (and so apostolic) set of ideas, but represent a supposed ‘Christianisation’ of the old pagan Roman imperial self-understanding. It’s far from clear that pagan Rome, as such, could ever have been ‘Christianised’ to the point where it came into line with the apostles’ teaching, as found in Scripture. Does Kingdom Christianity even work that way? That question wasn’t going to be asked seriously until the run-up to the Reformation, a thousand years and more later. The emphasis on martyrs’ shrines would become even more marked with time, and we’ll need to consider this development later. The question of the appropriateness, or otherwise, of church buildings (‘basilicas’) has only really begun to be addressed in our own day.

[19] p162.
[20] p163.

Augustine of Hippo

Although he lived when the first Christendom reached the height of its power and influence, Augustine of Hippo died just as it was collapsing – along with the Roman Empire in the West. But, even as that collapse was taking place, he produced many of the key ideas that made the second Christendom, which lasted until our own time, possible.

Aurelius Augustinus was born in 354 at Thagaste in what is now Algeria, but was then part of the Roman province of Africa. In what was a strongly matriarchal society, his domineering mother, Monica, a devoted Catholic, was the major influence on him from childhood. North Africa didn't do moderate religious belief. Fanaticism was standard. The Catholic Church was the minor expression of Christianity there, the hardline, dissenting, Donatist Church the dominant grouping. The Donatists had broken away from the Catholics after a time of severe persecution, because of the lenient line the Catholic authorities had taken on some persecution-related issues. Each side, in a thoroughly unchristian way, applied against the other whatever pressure it could – and violence was not uncommon.

In later life, Augustine recalled an upbringing of unremitting harshness, and said he would rather die than become a child again. This didn't prevent him excelling in his studies, however, and he completed his higher education in Carthage, the capital of Roman Africa. He was soon appointed professor of rhetoric (public advocacy) in Carthage. We would think of him as a kind of lawyer. As he grew into adulthood, he couldn't identify with his mother's Catholic faith, which he found far too primitive. Instead, he became involved in a cult that had originated in Persia, Manichaeism – a form of Gnosticism. This group understood the universe to be in the grip of two equal and opposite powers, good and evil. Physical reality was evil, according to them – including the human body. But

there was a divine spark in human beings, they taught, and by living in a certain, self-denying, ascetical way, it was possible for individuals to be saved – for the divine spark to escape from the fleshly body and return to its proper home. Augustine only ever became a second-class Manichee, because, as was common, he had a concubine [unofficial wife], whom he wasn't prepared to give up.

But by the time he went to Rome to further his career, he'd come to have serious doubts about this cult. From Rome he went north to Milan – at that time the capital of the Western Roman Empire – where he was appointed to the highly-influential municipal professorship of public rhetoric. By now he ranked as a serious philosopher as well as holding a highly prestigious position. Like others who experienced rapid promotion in Imperial life, he got rid of his concubine in order to contract a proper – and advantageous – marriage. But ill-health intervened. Perhaps the high level of stress he was experiencing, which arose in part from a deep-seated lack of peace, contributed to the breakdown in his health.

In Milan Augustine started to come under the influence of Ambrose, the highly capable bishop of that city. Ambrose possessed the academic ability, the communication skills, and the raw leadership ability to make a profound impact on Augustine. He drew Augustine powerfully towards Christianity. The problem with this was that Ambrose held some highly unbiblical views; which – as implied above – governed his pastoral practice. He also held some considerably-less-than-Christian attitudes. Ambrose actively encouraged hostility towards the Goths, who had invaded northern Italy. (Germanic tribes such as the Goths were pouring into the Roman Empire, virtually uncontrolled, at this time – and the Romans, like the Greeks, had the lowest opinion of those they considered 'barbarians'). He was even more hostile towards the Jews, whose synagogues he forbade the Emperor to have rebuilt after Christian mobs had destroyed them. Augustine would inherit Ambrose's anti-semitism.

Ambrose and his circle followed a version[21] of the highly-sophisticated 'Neo-Platonist' philosophy which mixed Plato's thinking with many other ideas in a highly original way. The way Ambrose used the Bible was deeply influenced by this philosophy. Its encouragement of an allegorical way of interpreting texts allowed the natural meaning of the Bible text (not always the literal one) to be by-passed. To treat a piece of text as allegory is to see as written in code. But there's no key to the code. So the person doing the interpreting guesses what the code is: there's no control over the process. This way of operating really helped Augustine, who was now able – as he thought – to see the true meaning in Scripture beneath what it seemed to say on the surface. This philosophical approach opened him up to Catholic Christianity, and he experienced a real, indeed profound, evangelical conversion. (One problem with his conversion was that, at this time, conversion wasn't experienced in a fully New Testament way).

His use of allegorical interpretation meant that Augustine could always decide for himself what Scripture meant, rather than standing under its authority – his true intention. People who allow themselves to decide what the Bible means, effectively standing in judgement over the text, are highly vulnerable to reading into the Bible their existing belief system. This is a hazard for anyone. It proved disastrously the case for Augustine. Ironically so, because he would become a painstaking biblical scholar. Augustine had the ability to read the (true) meaning out of the Bible with extraordinary perception – and then turn it into preaching material and theological thought of the highest order. But, at the crunch points, his existing worldview and prejudices would, all too often, over-ride what the Bible actually said. It's not as though he wasn't prepared to change his mind: he was, and he did. Besides, he was highly interested in his own psychology and that of others – his insights in this area are exceptional. Ultimately, though, he couldn't see the way in which his subconscious was controlling his belief system – or the extent to which this was happening.

[21] That of Plotinus.

Around the time his health broke down, Augustine and some other philosophical friends established a permanent philosophical community on a country estate just outside of Milan. Such a way of life had been the ideal for philosophers since the rise of classical Greek philosophy. Here he wrote most of his early books. But, as his Christian discipleship developed, and he heard about the monastic life in places like Egypt, he became aware of a call to return to Africa and pioneer a specifically Christian kind of philosophical community there. This he did. The project was a great success. As a lay monk with extraordinary gifts – especially by the standards of Roman Africa – he was soon pressed into service (rather against his will) as a priest in the Catholic Church. The bishop used him – irregularly – to perform tasks such as preaching that were at that time reserved for the bishops. He succeeded his bishop at Hippo, but without leaving behind the monastic life, which he lived very faithfully.

As a bishop in the part of the Church favoured by the state, he gained secular responsibilities – for which his legal training stood him in particularly good stead. This immersion in the affairs of the world helpfully kept Augustine – by nature an otherworldly monk, despite his early ambitions in life – connected to the realities of human existence. He sought to be as Christian as diligent in the way he carried out his secular tasks. It was in his conduct of church business that his behaviour stands up less well to scrutiny. In this, also, he was only too diligent. His aim was that the minority Catholic community in Africa shouldn't just become dominant in place of the dissident Donatists, but that it should re-absorb them – using whatever methods proved necessary.

Augustine seems to have had an, at best, distant relationship with his (rather violent) father. But he rarely mentions him in the autobiographical sections of his voluminous writings, and hardly seemed to notice his passing. With his controlling, manipulating mother, however, he had an intense relationship. It was she who had put him onto the road to committed Christian faith, and her death

affected him deeply. The effect of such distorted parental influence would become manifest later on in his life. So too would the impact on him of the physical abuse he – like so many boys at the time – endured at school as part of the ‘educational’ process[22]. He came to think that physical coercion is the only way to control fallen human nature – whether in the case of individuals or groups – and the only way to get people to become useful citizens[23]. He’d concluded that, as much as he hated being subjected to physical pain and degradation, it had greatly benefited him[24]. This understanding of his own experience he proceeded to project onto the life of both the Empire and the Church.

When challenged by his Donatist opponents about his approval, indeed encouragement, of the use of force against fellow believers – totally at variance with the position taken by the Christian community hitherto – Augustine appealed to God’s drastic dealings with his people Israel in the Old Testament; surrendering his earlier convictions on the matter to do so. This brings us to another characteristic of Augustine’s: he always had to win his argument, irrespective of what a balanced view of the evidence overall might suggest. (The rhetorical side of his training always seemed to win out against what he’d learnt about balanced, objective justice – although, when not arguing his own case, he understood the latter well enough). And Augustine’s side, too, had to win. This also stemmed from his upbringing. His appeal to the Old Testament, in the matter of the coercion of dissenters and others, is evidence of a serious blind-spot in his theology. Not surprisingly, it was he who provided the – completely indefensible – theological justification for imposing Catholic Christianity on the population. The basis for this was the master’s words to his servants in Jesus’

[22] Significantly, as ‘classical’ [i.e. Greek and Latin] studies came to be adopted in the British educational system in boarding schools and universities, abusive ‘corporal’ [physical] punishment started to be introduced, in parallel.

[23] Not the NT’s understanding. Student of Paul’s writings though he became, he never saw the force of Rom 2:4, where Paul reminds us that it is ‘God’s kindness that leads us to repentance’.

[24] This very neatly neutralised the guideline given us by Christ that we treat others as we’d wish to be treated ourselves. It was also logically flawed: he was arguing, fallaciously, ‘from the particular to the general’ (the reverse of the inductive scientific method), from, that is, his own particular experience to the wellbeing of the whole human race.

parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:23: “Go into the roads and country lanes and *make* [people] come in, so that my house will be full.”

As would be true of John Calvin – also a lawyer by training – at the Reformation, Augustine didn’t see clearly enough how the Old and New Testaments relate to each other. There was a sense, too, in which he came to have a vested interest in not doing so – and that may have exacerbated the problem.

He showed what committed, enthusiastic Christianity can look like when the Church no longer ‘has the Holy Spirit’, in the New Testament sense of that term – as well as when it uses the Old and New Testaments as though they hardly need to be distinguished from one another, which can often arises from that. R.A. Markus, in an article entitled *Augustine*, observes of him that: ‘He was the product of the Roman civilisation of which his lifetime saw the final crumbling’[25]. The longer he lived, the more deeply this son of fanatical Roman Africa was influenced by the spirit of the Roman Empire. Especially because the Emperor and the Empire were now nominally Christian (i.e. Catholic), he found it easy to make common cause with the ‘secular’ authorities – which, given his rather Old Testament view of Christianity, he didn’t actually see as ‘secular’. These authorities could as appropriately be turned on the Donatist ‘heretics’, to suppress them, as on the pagans – and as Bishop Augustine he would do just that. His justification of his views and actions would provide the ideology underlying both the Crusades (disastrous in nearly all their effects) and the dreadful cruelties of the Inquisition.

Peter Brown observes that Augustine ‘was a man steeped in Neo-Platonic thought’[26]. Indeed, there’s a sense in which, if Pope Damasus and others were engaged in a misconceived attempt to Christianise pagan Rome, Augustine was unknowingly trying to Christianise the Neo-Platonist worldview (which doesn’t

[25] In ed. D.J. O’Connor, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*; 1964; New York; The Free Press, Macmillan; ISBN 0-02-923840-4; p80.
[26] *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*; he makes this general point throughout the book.

work – they're as incompatible with one another as Christianity is with Roman paganism). He also sought to do justice to the biblical worldview on its own terms, but only did this in parallel with the 'Christianised Neo-Platonism' that was yet more deeply-rooted in his thinking. Result: a sub-Christian mixture of ideas, causing confusion about the true nature of Christianity.

This mixture created a massive, and long-term, distortion in the life of the Church of what had been the Western Roman Empire (Western Europe, as it would become) – because Augustine's thought was foundational for what came after. 'Augustine's influence on the course of subsequent theology has been immense,' says *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 'He moulded the whole of that of the Middle Ages down to the 13th century …' The influences sown into him, first, and most fundamentally, the Roman, and then, secondarily, the Neo-Platonist, he in turn sowed into the Church. They are still in the DNA of the Church, and need to be recognised for what they are.

AUGUSTINE THE THINKER For a variety of reasons, the Early Church neglected the doctrine of Creation and its implications. Disastrously so. Christianity, according to the Bible, is about a lot more than people 'being saved' – even if that's the most important thing. The human race was placed on the planet with a commission to oversee and care for it (Gen 1-3). Augustine was the first Christian thinker to take our physical existence and role in the world seriously. It's ironic that the Christian theologian to take proper account of the created order should be a Neo-Platonist – because Neo-Platonism is characterised by its 'spiritualising' of everything. But Augustine's understanding was that Neo-Platonism had served to prepare him for the Gospel by liberating him from a crudely materialistic understanding of reality (which is what most Christians, and so many others, then had). What the Bible taught about the world's createdness was an example of where he reckoned to part company with the philosophy he'd found so helpful. (He was, though, as we've seen, more deeply Neo-Platonist than he knew).

The philosophy that prevailed in his time – like that in our own – tended to deny even the possibility of true knowledge. Augustine committed himself to answering the sceptics by gaining an understanding of the mechanisms of human knowledge – how we come to know – and to showing that we indeed have access to knowledge of reality and truth (even if not all that we think we know is consistent with reality and truth). His accounts of self-awareness and perception, of imagination, memory and reasoning, are as interesting as they're insightful. (Of course, they're not always right). By re-establishing confidence in the human capacity to come by truth, he enabled the generations following him to believe that education could be useful, and that learning and research weren't simply destined to throw up only the illusion of gaining new knowledge. On such a renewed foundation Europe and the West could be built – and were built. The resurgence of profound scepticism in the West today (from similar philosophical roots), by contrast, is serving to undermine our civilisation.

Another – and considerable – contribution towards a Christian understanding of the world came with Augustine's book, *City of God*. In 410 Rome had fallen to the Goths under Alaric, which caused consternation across the civilised world. Hippo would fall to the Vandals – another Germanic tribe – in 430, even as Augustine lay dying there. So Roman Africa became for twenty years 'Rome after the fall of Rome'. In 413 *City of God* started to appear. Only shortly before, the Catholic Church, with the State's help, had seemed unstoppable. Now he Roman State was visibly collapsing. What were Catholics to think? Even their bishops didn't know. "If Rome can perish", the theologian Jerome asked, "what can be safe?" In the midst of seeming disaster, Augustine started producing answers. His preliminary answer to Rome's fall – offered early – wouldn't be his final one: The city of Rome, still given to its paganism, had been punished, not replaced. The next position he adopted was less sanguine: There's an end to every kingdom – hopefully Rome's end hasn't arrived just yet. By the time he wrote the book, however, he was seeing Rome's history as in no way privileged; a drastic

revision of what he and his contemporaries had grown up believing. What he now wanted to say to Catholics was that they were indeed citizens of a privileged city, but that that city was ‘Jerusalem’. Since the Fall, he said, the human race had always been divided into two great ‘cities’ one of which served God and his loyal angels (Jerusalem), the other of which served the Devil, his rebel angels and the demons (Babylon). Although these two ‘cities’ seemed inextricably mixed up in both the observable Church and the world, at the Last Judgement they’d be separated for all to see. Augustine understood, of course, that he was using the two historical cities, Jerusalem and Babylon, symbolically, - but Scripture does that too. We Christians, he wanted to communicate, are ‘resident aliens’, strangers in this world: our citizenship is, ultimately, in another place. *City of God*, like Augustine’s writings on human knowledge, is a study all on its own. But its significance is this: the picture it painted was so relevant to his age, and so easily applicable to their predicament, that it prepared a new generation to start building a Christian civilisation again, with a revised (if still a Christendom) ideology, even in the midst of chaos and disaster.

When those who followed Augustine came to read his books and the records of his teaching, they did so without any sense of the development of his thought and its historical context(s). Had they done so, they might have seen how the basic thesis of *City of God* effectively undermines the concept of Christendom. What actually happened was that the Catholic Church had to re-establish itself in precarious and very violent times – which remained violent, ruthless and dictatorial even when some semblance of stability and order were established. In this later period, Augustine’s coercive, Christendom model must have seemed to the Catholic hierarchy as relevant and helpful in their situation as the two-cities model had proved when the Western Empire collapsed.

PREDESTINATION When Augustine was ordained priest, he was committed to the idea that human beings are free to choose between good and evil. But his experience over the years convinced him otherwise. He came to believe that only

the invasion of the grace of God – on divine initiative – could bring necessary change into people's lives. Also that only some people, the elect [those chosen by God], were predestined to know this saving work of God in their lives. Only the elect ever came to be part of the 'Jerusalem' that would be revealed at the Judgement. The rest were a lost cause. His dispute with the British monk-theologian, Pelagius, who utterly disagreed with him, is one of the most celebrated in church history. (Augustine 'won' the argument, of course – at least, for many centuries he did). One might think that the idea of predestination rather conflicts with the concept of coercion. Clearly Augustine didn't think so. If coercion was God's way of 'educating' his chosen people in the Old Testament, then it wasn't at all incompatible with his election of individuals – indeed, it would help reveal who the elect were. Some of the results of this kind of thinking will be seen later on.

NOMINAL CHRISTIANITY One problem to which Augustine the bishop had no answer was that of nominal belief amongst Catholics. Nominalism was one of the results of Christendom – and a hardline belief in predestination did nothing to help in addressing the situation. There were significant numbers of committed believers across the Empire, but they constituted only a fraction of the Catholic population. So a situation arose over time in which there was an elite of clergy and individuals and communities who lived a more-or-less monastic life, on the one hand, and a mass of superstitious nominal Catholics who embraced the occult as readily as they appreciated the 'magical' Catholic sacraments of which they also took advantage. (The dissident Donatists hardly constituted a healthier community overall).

Nominalism increasingly diluted church life. Submission to 'baptism' was now what made someone a Christian – a far cry from salvation by grace through faith (Eph 2:8). People were initiated wholesale into church life (it couldn't be into the Christianity the apostles had taught). In due course, infant baptism became mandatory – except for Jews, who were usually treated as being outside

Christendom. Augustine complained about ‘mobs of depraved people who fill the churches, but only in a physical sense’. Martin of Braga spoke of people playing dice and talking throughout church services.

Not all of the elite, even in Augustine’s time, would have qualified for the description ‘committed, consistent believers’. The existence of an elite in the historic expressions of Church has lasted down to the present day – and during the centuries which followed the first Christendom, the elite was forever growing degenerate, such that there had to be frequent attempts at reform (not all of which was unsuccessful). The final disintegration of nominal Christianity seems to be occurring in our own time – although some of it may survive for a while yet, particularly in the USA.

SYNCRETISM Syncretism is the mixing of Christianity with alien religious beliefs and practices. Nominalism led to a situation in which, not only were the majority of supposed Christians unconverted, but many of them engaged in pagan practices to the point of actually worshipping other gods. In Carthage, North Africa, in Augustine’s time, ‘Christian’ parents would often dedicate their children to the Goddess of Heaven (Ashtoreth, the fertility goddess, and consort of Baal) as well as having them ‘baptised’. Pope Leo the Great would condemn those who, on arriving at St Peter’s on Easter Day 440, turned east to honour the sun before going inside.

The Church generally was absorbing into its life a disturbing amount of paganism at this period – so corrupting the Christian faith. If Ashtoreth was Queen of Heaven, what relationship to Mary, mother of Jesus, had ‘Mary’, Queen of Heaven? The latter was at best a combining of the Canaanite/Carthaginian fertility goddess and the Lord’s mother – when believers are meant to have nothing to do with Canaanite deities (Deut 7:1-6).

The cult of the saints, at whose graves Heaven and Earth are supposed to be joined, has proved hard for even Catholic scholars to fathom. But it seems clear enough, historically, that an old pagan practice was being continued, though in a modified form, by the Christian community. This was something akin to spiritualism – an inappropriate communing with the dead. Post-Roman and medieval church life would come to be built around the shrines of the martyrs and other 'saints'. If not all about this was unhealthy – there really is a communion of saints – far too much was. And 'Mary' and 'the saints' came to usurp the place that, according to the New Testament, the Lord had reserved for himself – which tended to show them for what they really were.