1 The Christian Movement in the Second and Third Centuries

1 Christians in the Roman Empire
2 The First Theologians
3 Constructing Christian Churches

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1 Christians in the Roman Empire

We begin at the beginning of the second century, a time of great stress as Christians struggled to explain their religious beliefs to their Roman neighbors, to create liturgies that expressed their beliefs and values, and to face persecution and martyrdom courageously. It may seem odd to omit discussion of the life and times of Christianity's founder, but scholarly exploration of the first century of the common era is itself a field requiring a specific expertise. Rather than focus on Christian beginnings directly, we will refer to them as necessitated by later interpretations of scripture, liturgy, and practice.

Second-century Christians were diverse, unorganized, and geographically scattered. Paul's frequent advocacy of unity among Christian communities gives the impression of a unity that was in fact largely rhetorical. Before we examine Christian movements, however, it is important to remind ourselves that Christians largely shared the world-view and social world of their neighbors. Polarizations of "Christians" and "pagans" obscure the fact that Christians were Romans. They participated fully in Roman culture and economic life; they were susceptible, like their neighbors, to epidemic disease and the anxieties and excitements of city life. As such, they were repeatedly shocked to be singled out by the Roman state for persecution and execution on the basis of their faith.

The physical world of late antiquity

The Mediterranean world was a single political and cultural unit. Twenty days sailing connected one end of the Mediterranean to the other, and ideas traveled rapidly along trade routes. The dream of one world, originated in the Greek polis, was still a powerful dream that Romans had militarized, creating a political reality. Jewish monotheism and philosophers' construction of a uni-verse also formulated the ideal of one world.

Ideas of the physical universe and human life were intimately related. The earth was thought of as a globe suspended in space in the center of concentric moving planets.

Earth was surrounded by an envelope of thick, murky, terrestrial atmosphere that reached as far as the moon. Beyond the moon were the sun and five planets. Fiery ether, the purest material element, supported the planets and the stars. The universe was pictured as a body, alive and divinely ordered, in which each part was connected by an internal *sympatheia*, or community of life. The parts of this universe were not of equal value. Earth was formed from the dregs or sediment of the universe – cold, heavy, impure stuff, whose weight had caused it to sink to the center. At the other end of the universe, the ether, atmosphere of the stars, was clear, weightless, and pure. The most influential thinker of the second century, the Platonist Numenius, said that God and the material world exist independently and in opposition to one another. Soul enters body by falling from its heavenly home, through the planetary spheres, accumulating evil as it comes into contact with the material world.

Since ether was considered the most desirable atmosphere of the universe, it was believed that contemplation of the stars could remove the strain of daily cares and occupations. A second-century man, Vettius Valens, wrote:

> I was not excited by the various courses of horses and the swift rush of the whip, or by the rhythms of dancers and the idle delight of flutes and the Muse and languorous strains, no, nor did I have any part in harmful or beneficial occupations, but having chanced upon divine and reverent contemplation of things celestial, I wished to cleanse my character of all vice and pollution, and to leave my soul immortal. Those who busy themselves with foreknowledge of the future and with the truth acquire a soul that is free from slavery, and despise fortune, and do not persist in vain hope, do not fear death, and live without perturbation, having schooled their souls to be brave, and they are not puffed up by prosperity or depressed by adversity, but are content with what they have. As they are not hankering after the impossible, they bear with equanimity what is ordained, and being freed from bondage to pleasure and flattery, they are soldiers of fate. For it is impossible for anyone by prayers or sacrifices to overcome what was fixed from the beginning and alter it to his taste; what has been assigned to us will happen to us without our praying for it; what is not fated will not happen for our prayers.

For many people, however, it was difficult to accept fate; they looked for religions that offered freedom from – or at least leverage against – the merciless tyranny of fate.

Christianity grew primarily in urban settings in which food was the most precious commodity. Roman people had constant anxiety about the availability of food as 10 percent of the population lived on the labor of the rural 90 percent. Emperors tried to appease the urban poor with the infamous "bread and circuses," distributing free bread when it was available and, when bread supplies failed, distracting the poor from their growling stomachs with shows in the public coliseum. Roman roads existed, and were maintained, because of their importance as food routes.

Rome had no internal police force. Each household was responsible for its own protection against burglary, rape, and murder. Toward the end of the third century urban life had become so hazardous that most people went to bed each night wondering if they would wake up in the morning. Individuals could disappear without a trace. The Roman historian Socrates described job recruitment for the all-important baking industry in third-century Rome:

> Now the houses where bread was baked were built below ground level, and they constructed taverns at the side of each. The bakers entrapped many of those who went there by the following means: They used a certain mechanical contrivance to precipitate people from the tavern to the bakery below. This was done primarily to strangers and those who were caught in this way were forced to work in the bakery, where they were imprisoned until old age. Their friends, meanwhile, concluded that they were dead.
>
> (*Historia ecclesiastica* 5.18)

Until the middle of the second century CE, infectious disease in the Roman Republic and Empire was relatively stable. This changed dramatically when a plague, probably smallpox (lethal in previously unexposed populations) began in 165 and lasted until about 180 in Italy and the western part of the Empire. The physician Galen estimated that between a quarter and a third of Italy's population died. Despite the untrustworthiness of ancient estimates, the numbers estimated can be taken to indicate that contemporaries experienced the plague as devastating. In 251 another new disease appeared. Called the "Antonine plague," it was probably measles. According to contemporary chroniclers, it killed 5,000 people a day in Rome alone for several months.

The person and the world

Politically, the Roman Empire was threatened and shrinking, besieged at its borders by Northern European tribes. It was a frightened society suffering from chronic malnutrition and epidemic disease. How did people experience *themselves* in these circumstances? The Stoic philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius (d. 180) wrote especially vividly of the human condition. Human beings, he said, are "a pinpoint in infinite time; a knife-edge between two eternities;" human activity is "smoke and nothingness;" human achievement was a "bird flying past, vanished before we can grasp it." Most startling of all, this Roman emperor described war as "puppies quarreling over a bone." He saw the world as a stage, with human beings, like puppets or marionettes "jerking on a string." Similarly, Stoic popular preachers often used images of terminal illness. In an imaginary dialogue of a patient with a doctor, Seneca has the doctor say: "You are much worse off than you will let yourself realize. Let philosophy diagnose your case." The Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "The lecture room of a philosopher is a hospital."

The Roman world at the turn of the second century was one in which religions and philosophical schools alike were preoccupied with providing people with orientation to a world in which they could feel at least somewhat at home. One Stoic teacher mixed philosophy and practicality:

> O poor wretches, learn and come to know the causes of things, what we are, for what life we are born, what the assigned order is, where the turning point of the course is to be rounded gently, what limit to set to spending money, for what it is right to pray, what is the use of hard cash, how much you ought to spend on your country and on those near and dear to you, what kind of a person God ordered you to be, and where, as a person, you are placed.

Painfully conscious of the suffering and insignificance of human existence, people were attracted by religious power. How best could one align oneself with the benevolent

forces of the universe? Could one manipulate these forces at all? Philosophy, religion, and magic were often indistinguishable as spells, formulae, incantations, and amulets formed the repertoire of educated and uneducated people alike. Romans were religiously tolerant, frequently integrating several philosophies and religions in order to construct effective protection for individuals and households. They put together a religious *package*. Tolerant of everything but intolerance, Romans found Christians' insistence on "one way" puzzling and repugnant.

It has often been thought that by the second century, neither Roman civic religion nor the worship of the old Roman gods was religiously persuasive. This impression may have been based on the scarcity of literary expositions on the Roman pantheon. Yet the rhetoric of a sacred empire sanctioned Rome's civic and military goals. "Romans were meticulous in their efforts to secure divine support at every step" (Futrell, 1997: 78). Roman civic religion provided the formal bond of the empire, centered on the ritual worship of the legally deified emperor. The old Roman gods were conspicuously pictured on coins, statues, and pottery that was frequently stamped "*providentia deorum*" (the gods are looking after us). Moreover, the "mass media" of Roman society, coliseum performances, were saturated with religious ritual and clothing. Roman religion permeated Roman society. We can understand non-Christian Romans' resentment of Christianity's exclusive claims only when we recognize the centrality of Roman religion to Roman life.

In the midst of pessimistic evaluations of human life and a bewildering number of religious options, second-century sources testify over and over again to a sense of something valuable *inside* the person, the community, or the human race – something unrelated to the physical world. Philosophies and religions sought to identify and cultivate this precious entity.

The religious climate of early Christianity

The Christian movement grew in a world that was complex – religiously, socially, philosophically, and politically. Roman philosophies and religions articulated and embodied different values from those of the Christian movement, but the women and men who shaped Christian beginnings learned from them, appropriating and adapting what they had learned in the formation of Christian ethics, theology, and liturgy. In the case of their Jewish neighbors, not merely "borrowings," but deep roots and dependency must be acknowledged, although the details are difficult to document. We will look briefly at the philosophies and religions that were Christianity's primary competitors.

Philosophies: getting the mind right

Philosophical schools of the second century apparently felt little rivalry with other philosophies. Addressed to the uneducated, they were more like religions than like modern philosophies in that they were primarily concerned with alleviating anxiety. Philosophical conversions often resulted in dramatic changes of life-style, sometimes accompanied by withdrawal from society. The most popular philosophies diagnosed the

problem of human existence as disorientation in the universe and prescribed a method for overcoming that painful condition.

Stoicism aimed at understanding the world in order to live in accord with it, to live "according to nature." Stoics believed that the universe was amenable to rational explanation because it is itself a rationally structured organism. Reason in human beings is the same as the reason embedded in the universe. Thus, according to Stoics, humans can be perfectly at ease in the universe if they develop their rational capacity. Rationality is, in fact, the *sole* source of human happiness. A complete indifference to external conditions must be cultivated, a disposition called "*apatheia*." *Apatheia* was not apathy, however. The model Stoic felt both pleasure and pain; what he did *not* feel were pleasures and pains resulting from mistaken judgments, or irrationality. Because of his perfect alignment with the rationality of the universe, the ideal Stoic's disposition was one of constant quiet pleasure.

Epicureans, the most misunderstood and vilified philosophers of the Roman Empire, identified human happiness as a life of pleasure. But Epicurus described the highest pleasure as *absence of pain*. None of the "pleasures" that eventuate in pain qualify:

> When we say that pleasure is the goal, we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated, but freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the soul. For it is not drinking and continuous parties nor sexual pleasures, nor the enjoyment of fish and other delicacies of a wealthy table which produce the pleasant life, but sober reasoning that searches out the causes of every act of choice and refusal and which banishes the opinions which give rise to the greatest mental confusion.

Neither Stoics nor Epicureans valued knowledge for its own sake. In fact, Stoics regularly criticized learning as a source of confusion and unhappiness. Seneca wrote: "To desire to know more than is necessary is a form of intemperance. The pursuit of liberal studies makes one wearisome, wordy, tactless, and complacent; they do not learn what they need because they have already learned things which are superfluous." For Epicurus, "getting the mind right" meant rejection of *reliance* on reason. Epicurus diagnosed the cause of human unhappiness as mistaken belief in the gods, the soul, and an afterlife of reward or punishment. The gods exist, Epicurus said, but they do not interfere with human life in any way; to do so would be incompatible with the perfect happiness they enjoy. Soul and body are born, grow, and dissolve together, and there is complete and permanent loss of consciousness at death.

Although the philosophies of the Roman Empire did not value knowledge for its own sake, they did think it was crucial to understand the universe and the human place in it accurately.

Religions in the Roman Empire: direct sensuous experience

But not all Romans were attracted to philosophy in order to address nagging "dissatisfaction with oneself." Initiates in Roman religions did not seek conceptual orientation, but particular consciousness-altering experiences. There was great popular interest in mystery religions of three kinds: healing cults (such as Asclepius), oracle cults, and

oriental mystery religions. In healing cults, medical attention was secondary to the interpretation of dreams and identification of destructive thoughts and self-images. The complex psychological and physical factors that made the individual sick were the focus of attention.

Oracle cults (such as Delphi) were consulted frequently. By the second century advance notice was given of questions to be asked, and the questions were increasingly practical and personal, such as: Whom will I marry? Or, will I succeed in a particular business venture? The oracle claimed, "When we serve our god, he hides nothing from us."

Robin Lane Fox has reconstructed the visit of a second-century man to an oracle shrine near Boetia in Greece. After arriving at the spot, the client

> lived for several days in the shrine, abstaining from hot baths and waiting until the priests proclaimed a favorable night from their studies of the entrails of a ram. Then he was washed and anointed. The priests took him to drink from the two springs, Memory and Forgetfulness. He then gazed on a secret image, prayed, worshipped, and dressed in a linen tunic. He was taken to the oracle's entrance, a chasm in the ground, down which he climbed on a thin ladder and then passed, feet first, into the lower darkness, holding cakes of honey. Underground, he was taught about the future, "not always in the same way," (Pausanius wrote), "for one person sees, another hears." He returned through the same narrow hole and was revived by the attendant priests, who asked him to report all that he had seen and heard. He emerged "gripped with terror and quite unaware of himself of those around him," but later his wits returned to him and also, added Pausanius, "the power to laugh."
> (Fox, 1987: 206)

The third kind of popular Roman religions were oriental mystery religions. Originally tribal religions from Asia Minor, Phrygia, and Egypt, the mystery religions were brought to the Roman Empire by merchants, slaves, and returning soldiers. Mystery religions featured secret rites that included an experience of the deity and the conferral of a spiritual self. According to participant reports, mystery religions knew how to *prepare* and *pace* the desired experience, and thus to produce and guarantee it.

Immortality was a consistent theme of mystery religions. Initiates rehearsed the soul's ascent after death back through the planetary spheres through which they had fallen into human life. The *Corpus hermeticum* describes the soul's ascent at death as a process in which the gross material of the physical world and the body is progressively eliminated until the soul is naked, the "true self," free to enter the divine realm and again become one with God. The right passwords to recite as one's soul travels, after death, to reunion with its source were essential. Initiations combined this knowledge with sensory experiences.

Initiations involved a series of exercises in which the initiate was weaned from habitual behavior, food, and sleep by fasting, lengthy periods of waiting, prayers, burning of incense (perhaps of intoxicating substances), and rituals of bathing and purification. Initiation in the Mithra cult included a ceremony called the *taurobolium*, first practiced in the West in 137 CE. After preparatory exercises, the initiate lay under a platform with loose slats on which a bull was slaughtered. Drenched with hot blood and gore, the initiate was instructed to make sure that he was completely covered by the blood; he was also to swallow some of the blood. Initiates who could not afford a bull could substitute a sheep, in which case the ritual became a *criobolium*.

Mystery religions promised not only immortality, but also more immediate and practical benefits, like protection from shipwreck, illness, and misfortune. They used a word that became important in the Christian movement: *soteria* – salvation. They also used metaphors of death and rebirth, speaking of initiates as reborn, changed, or deified.

No one feared being in a religious minority. Truth was not thought of as democratic; on the contrary, it was considered *necessarily* esoteric and difficult to achieve. Like those who followed the various philosophical schools, initiates in mystery religions felt they had something of ultimate value from which the rest of the world was excluded – by inability to travel to Delphi, by poverty, inability to understand, or by lack of the necessary preliminary disciplines.

Jews and Christians

Judaism was the most influential of the religious and philosophical neighbors of Christianity. The first Christians were Jews, and they continued to be influenced by Judaism throughout the common era, but Christians and Jews were also intense rivals. On the one hand, Christians, as a "new religious movement" in a society that did not value innovation, wanted to identify with the ancient and respected religion of the Jews; on the other hand, they sought to establish their difference from Judaism. Christians' strong ambivalence about Judaism appears in the earliest Christian literature. The Christian author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* (c.70–100) was shrilly angry at Jews, calling them "wretched men." Yet he called himself "one of yourselves and especially loving you all above my own life." In the early centuries, Christian ambivalence can be seen as sibling rivalry, but by the end of the fourth century the imbalance of public power between Christians and Jews in the Christian Empire changed that relationship.

Christians attempted to explain why Jewish tradition and scriptures now belonged to, or had been "inherited" by Christianity. "Supersessionist" theology claimed that Christ's birth fulfilled and completed God's promises to the Jews, rendering Judaism no longer a living religion. At the end of the fourth century, this theology led to destruction of synagogues and the marginalization of Jews from public life. Later, at the end of the eleventh century, the first pogroms occurred. Christian treatment of the ancient religion within which it originated is not an attractive aspect of the history of Christianity, but it should not be ignored.

The translation of Hebrew scripture into Greek was begun in the middle of the third century BCE in Alexandria. According to legend, 72 translators, working independently, arrived at an identical translation of the Pentateuch; other parts of the Hebrew scriptures were translated later. The so-called *Septuagint*, became Christians' "Old Testament." By the second and third centuries, some rabbis expressed their regret that the Hebrew scriptures had become accessible to non-Jews by being translated into Greek. They denounced the compilation of the *Septuagint* as a sin comparable to the worship of the golden calf.

Christians

The earliest Christians were Jews. W. H. C. Frend writes: "They used the Hebrew scriptures and they took the messianism, the eschatology, and the ethics of Judaism for

granted. Like the Jews they claimed to be 'saints,' or 'people of God,' a 'royal priesthood' and a 'holy nation'" (122). Like Jews, Christians prayed three times a day and fasted twice a week. Christians also professed monotheism as did Jews. It is likely that Christians were indebted to Jews for liturgical practices like naked baptism, and the eucharistic celebration echoes the Jewish blessing of the cup after a meal. However, exactly what Christians "borrowed" from Judaism is not known. Liturgical scholar Paul F. Bradshaw concludes his detailed inspection of the evidence for the earliest Christian worship, "We must be content to remain agnostic about many of the roots of Christian worship practices which we observe clearly for the first time in the following centuries" (Bradshaw, 2002: 45). Practices associated with baptism and preparation for membership were diverse and local.

Scholars of the New Testament and Christian beginnings are presently questioning assumptions about the "early Church," rather than "filling in the blanks" of a picture that is in fact partial, local, and heavily informed by particular perspectives – the historical author's and the historian's. Moreover, "Christian" and "pagan" should not be thought of as polar contrasts. Christians participated in the everyday life of the Roman Empire, sharing a social and cultural world with non-Christian neighbors. They also had common questions concerning the place of women, the roles of slaveholders and slaves, the legitimacy of itinerant preachers, and sexuality. In short, Roman religions and Judaism were not "background" for, but interactive, *with* Christianity.

For example, Christians received from Roman culture ideas of the ideal body that informed their notion of "the Christian body." The ideal body of late classical culture was controlled through regimes of diet and the limitation of sexual activity, a body whose practices and habits were carefully chosen. The ideal body was everything that slave bodies were not and could not be, for slaves were reduced to bodies; *to soma* (body) was used synonymously with *ho doulos* (slave). Slaves were gendered female – available for any duty, without kinship relations, and sexually accessible. By law, sexual coercion on a slave could not be considered rape. Slaves could also be tortured in ways that citizens could not. Christians were slaveholders, like their neighbors. Slave collars adorned with crosses have been discovered.

Cultural historian Jennifer Glancy has shown that Christian writings, both canonical and extra-canonical, are permeated with slaveholders' perspectives. Slaves were consistently admonished to obey their masters in everything, and especially not to run away. Christians were instructed not to shelter runaway slaves, no matter what the circumstances. The lack of any writing *by* slaves means that slaves' perspectives cannot be recovered.

Two results of great importance emerge from the social reality of slavery. First, in the literature of Christian movements slavery was used as a metaphor. Numerous Christian authors claim that it is far better to be an actual slave than to be a slave of sin. The spiritualization of slavery trivialized the significance of actual slavery and its effects on the bodies of slaves. Second, like their classical ancestors and secular neighbors, Christians constructed "the Christian body" as opposite to the perpetual vulnerability and permeability of slave bodies. From the earliest extant Christian document, I Thessalonians 4.3-8, sexual purity was considered a requirement for becoming Christian. Yet slaves had no control over their sexual use by slaveholders. Under these circumstances, *could* a slave choose to be a Christian? There is evidence that some slaves were

Christians, but this may have been by their masters' choice of religion for the household rather than their own.

The Roman understanding of "body" is evident in Christians' theology of the "Word made flesh." Philosophers' ideal of a controlled body that represented a controlled self was embedded in the first Christian writings. As Christianity expanded, Christian "overachievers" went beyond the minimal demand that they forego *pornea* to practice the "pleasure of no pleasure," as one Christian author said. By the fourth century, catechesis, or instruction leading to membership in Christian communities, aimed not only at converting the mind to Christian beliefs, but also at christianizing by specific practices bodies hitherto understood as owned by the devil. The culmination of training for membership was baptism, naked, in the full congregation. Moreover, the Christian body was gendered male; women martyrs and ascetics were thought of as "becoming male" because, in Roman society, defining the self by ascetic practices was a male prerogative. Yet, ironically, the Christian body was also seen as a spiritualized slave body, a body perfectly obedient to Christ.

Both their belief in the "Word made flesh," and urgent social reality pressed Christians to examine and reconstruct their attitude toward bodies. The threat and reality of state-initiated martyrdom shaped Christians' experience and thought until well into the fourth century. Christian literature of the early centuries of the common era reflected preoccupation with martyrdom and the conflicts internal to Christian communities that were generated by persecution. This literature included manuals of church order, like the Syrian *Didache*, or "Teaching," that addressed practical problems and described a simple theology consisting of "the way of life," and "the way of death." Letters were also preserved, like those of Clement of Rome (c.100) and Ignatius of Antioch (d. c.117). *Actae*, or accounts of Christians' trials and martyrdoms, were read during liturgy on a martyr's "birthday" (the anniversary of her/his death).

Actae cannot be taken as literal accounts of martyrs' gestures and words, except to the extent that earlier *actae* might have prompted a later confessor's responses. They do, however, reveal Christians' thinking about martyrdom. A young Roman woman confessor's prison journal from the early third century, discussed in the next section, is especially revealing.

Martyrdom

Romans were usually tolerant, but they despised Christian intolerance. We can reconstruct, largely from trial transcripts and other Christian literature, some of the reasons Christians were hated and persecuted. Christians were considered subversive to the Roman state. Large-scale persecution did not occur until there were large enough numbers of Christians to make their presence threatening. In the eyes of their neighbors, Christians were "atheists" in that they refused to worship the deified emperor and the Roman gods that protected the Roman state. Christians were secretive in their worship; most people only heard rumors about them. Christians were also sometimes belligerent or supercilious. During the persecution in Lyons, when the governor questioned the bishop about the Christian God, he replied, "If you are worthy you will know."

Christians claimed repeatedly that conversion to Christian faith felt to them like transformation from death to life. Yet "stubborn" adherence to Christian faith sometimes resulted in premature and violent death. Until the so-called "Peace of the Church" under Constantine in 313 (later in the Eastern Empire), the threat of martyrdom was constant, but the reality was sporadic. Until the middle of the third century, persecutions were local and episodic. A persecution occurred in Rome in 64, in Smyrna in 117, and in Lyons in 177, but they were neither widespread nor systematic. In the early fourth century, however, scholars estimate that in the Eastern Empire between 303 and 312, 2,500 to 3,000 Christians were martyred. In the West during the same period, there were approximately 3,000 to 3,500 martyrs.

Sometimes persecution was initiated by provincial governors acting on the emperor's orders, but more frequently outbreaks of popular hatred against Christians prompted persecution. In about 197 the North African author Tertullian wrote: "If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there is a famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once, 'The Christians to the lion.' What [he remarked sarcastically], all of them to one lion?" (*Apology* 40.2).

Martyrs appeared to gain nothing. Their God did not rescue them from death, and the Roman government seemed to have triumphed in putting them to death. The fourth-century historian, Eusebius, imagined pagans saying among themselves, "Where is their god, and what good was their religion to them which they preferred even to their own lives?" (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.60).

Christian martyrdom occurred in the context of public entertainment in Roman arenas. A brief description of coliseum culture will help to contextualize Christians' experience of martyrdom. Coliseum "games" originated in the Roman Republic as funeral celebrations; in the Empire, they developed into popular entertainment. The Roman coliseum, built in the first century under the Emperor Vesapian, seated about 50,000. Seating was by social order, with women and slaves at the top of the arena, farthest from the sights, sounds, and smells of the combats.

Roman religion was inseparable from the games. No clear distinction existed between capital punishment and sacrifice to the state gods. Victims were often dressed in cult garments according to the religious calendar. Christians objected to being clothed in such garments. The third-century *Actae of Perpetua and Felicity* described the two women's unwillingness to meet martyrdom in the robes of priests of Saturn. Appealing to the Roman sense of justice, Perpetua said, "We came to this of our own free will, that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives provided that we would do no such thing. You agreed with us to do this." The tribunal relented, and the women were allowed to proceed to martyrdom in their own garments.

A typical day at the coliseum began with wild beast hunts (*venationes*). Exotic wild animals were brought from the ends of the Empire at tremendous expense to be tortured and killed in the coliseum. Elephants – as many as 140 were used in a single celebration – bulls, foxes, bears, and lions were favorites. At noon most spectators took a lunch break while criminals and prisoners were summarily executed. In the afternoon, gladiators with elaborate costumes and stage sets fought, often to the death. Due to the expense, gladiatorial combats (*munera)* were usually sponsored by emperors. Most of the men who died in the coliseum were political prisoners or criminals. Punishment was *intended* to be "cruel and unusual," both entertainment and a public statement

about imperial power. Since punishment was considered a deterrent, it was made a spectacle.

The point of the gladiatorial combats was not their violence, however; rather, they were regarded as sport. Trained gladiators exhibited skill, self-control, and style. The crowd acted as umpire, deciding the fate of the defeated. If a gladiator had exhibited courage and skill, the crowd would be likely to yell, "Back off from the wounded man!" ("*Retro a saucio*.") If not, he received the death blow.

Did no one object to these displays? Moralists like Seneca objected, not to the cruelty to victims, but to the damage to spectators of viewing this violence. He wrote, "Nothing is so damaging to good character than the habit of wasting time at the games; for then it is that vice steals secretly upon you through the avenue of pleasure. . . . I come home more greedy, more ambitious, more voluptuous, and more cruel and more inhumane because I have been among other human beings." There is also evidence of sympathy for the slaughtered animals, but none is recorded for the human beings who suffered and died in the arena.

For Christians, however, martyrdom in Roman arenas came to be seen as nothing less than *proof* of the power of Christian faith. After the early fourth century Diocletian persecution, Athanasius wrote:

> Is martyrdom, then, a light proof of the weakness of death or is it a slight demonstration of the victory won over death by the Savior, when the young men and women that are in Christ are unafraid to die? For people are naturally afraid of death and of the dissolution of the body; but there is this most startling fact, that one who has put on the faith of the cross disregards even what is naturally fearful, and for Christ's sake is not afraid of death. . . . This is no small proof, but is rather an obvious guarantee of the power of the Savior.
> (*On the Incarnation* 28)

Although Christians revered martyrs, *volunteering* for martyrdom by acts that instigated one's own arrest and execution, was repeatedly forbidden by Christian leaders. Clement of Alexandria wrote, "We ourselves blame those who leap on death; for there are some who are eager to deliver themselves over in hatred of the creator, passionate for death. We say that these people commit suicide and are not martyred, even if they are officially executed."

Actae reveal that Christians did not blame their persecutors. The devil was their enemy; their tortures and pain were the result of the devil's activities, only indirectly attributable to the state's condemnation. It was the devil that influenced the judges who condemned them and the crowds who demanded their execution. Even judges' admonitions in the interest of saving them from death were seen as part of the devil's strategies. Christians also repeatedly blamed Jews for inciting persecution.

Why were Christians willing to suffer and die for their faith, when a simple civic act of throwing a few grains of incense on a fire in front of the emperor's portrait could save them? What reasons did *they* give? Three rationales occur repeatedly in letters and accounts of martyrdom. The most frequent explanation was that martyrdom imitated and participated in Christ's sufferings. The letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, a chained prisoner on his way to execution in Rome, described martyrdom as participation in the sufferings of Christ. The martyr accepts and shares Christ's suffering, but

Christ also suffers in, and instead of, the martyr. During a difficult childbirth in prison one of the guards asked the African confessor Felicity, " 'You who so suffer now, what will you do when you are flung to the beasts?' And she answered, 'Now I suffer what I suffer; but then another will be in me who will suffer for me, because I too am to suffer for him.' "

In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, martyrdom as participation in Christ's passion is especially vivid. The anonymous author presents both the reported events and Polycarp's responses as revealing a "martyrdom conformable to the gospel." Numerous details link Polycarp's martyrdom to that of Christ: Polycarp "waited to be betrayed just as the Lord did;" the name of the chief of police who arrested him was Herod; he was betrayed by members of his household at the instigation of Jews. Moreover, Polycarp's reported response to his arrest was not a pious formula, but an intentional repetition of Christ's words in the garden of Gethsemane, "God's will be done." Even the stab wound from which he died imitated Christ's pierced side. Miracles surrounding his death emphasized further Polycarp's access to Christ's power through sharing his death.

The second rationale referred to in Christian literature is that martyrdom constituted "release from a wicked and lawless society." Death apparently seemed to many confessors a welcome relief from a society that sneered at and rejected them, a society they saw as violent and corrupt. Anger and rage is evident in the taunts with which martyrs greeted coliseum crowds, in the scorn with which they wrote about their contemporaries, and in the belligerent words and acts with which they sometimes responded to judges and bystanders. Historians have often ignored both martyrs' anger, and their expectation of immediate heavenly reward, preferring to see acceptance of martyrdom as solely the result of Christians' love for Christ. Anger and rejection of a society that rejected and killed them, expectation of reward, *and* love for Christ must, however, be seen as aspects of their complex motivation.

The third motivation for accepting martyrdom was the repeated suggestion that the martyr's sufferings occurred "no longer in the flesh." Even in prison, awaiting execution, confessors experienced a heightened consciousness unlike ordinary consciousness. The noble young Carthaginian woman, Perpetua, left a prison journal in which she described the *privileges* associated with martyrdom. As a confessor, Perpetua felt empowered to perform acts that ranged from settling local church disputes to improving the otherworld status of a long-dead brother.

Christians did not regard martyrdom as "heroic" in the ordinary sense. Martyrdom accounts assumed that a person *cannot* approach shameful death with peace and joy *except* by a special grace. If a confessor was not given this grace, s/he was unable to maintain her/his confession. Because of this belief, confessors were remarkably generous to other Christians who renounced their faith in persecution. They were seen as simply "unready," "feeble," or "unable to bear the strain of a great contest." They were simply not *there*. Confessors felt "sorrow and grief immeasurable" for those who lapsed, but they did not seem to resent or judge them. Those who denied their faith were thought of as helpless victims of the devil, who dragged them, one *acta* says, into "unconsciousness."

Martyrdom accounts never hinted that bodies should be despised. Rather, martyrs died in the faith that they would be resurrected bodily in heaven at the instant of their death. While it was believed that Christians who died ordinary deaths would sleep until

the general resurrection, martyrs were believed to be in paradise "today, this very day." Just before his death, Polycarp is reported to have said:

> I bless thee because thou hast thought me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for resurrection to eternal life of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit, among whom may I be received into thy presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice.

Polycarp's apparent "denial of death" was the result of his self-identification, body and soul, with Christ's life. A letter from the church of Lyon during persecution expresses this common theme of martyrdom literature. "They [the martyrs] asked for life and God gave it to them, which they shared with their neighbors, and departed to God, in all ways victorious." The Greek Christian, Justin the Martyr (d. c.165) wrote in his *Apology*, "You can kill us, but you cannot do us any real harm." Christians thought of the new life they experienced in Christ as stronger than death, as capable of reaching across death to bring body and soul intact to paradise.

Second-century apology

Romans, Jews, and Christians all believed that the survival and fortune of individuals and the state depended on divine favor. Romans believed that if the gods who protected Rome and made her great did not receive the worship to which they were accustomed, they would withdraw their favor and protection. "We acknowledge that we are atheists with regard to such gods," Justin wrote, "but not with regard to the most true God." At the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine wrote the *City of God* to answer similar charges, namely, that Christians' defection caused the Sack of Rome in 410.

Christians tried to explain and defend beliefs and practices that seemed strange or threatening to their non-Christian neighbors. "Apology," although formally addressed to an emperor or an opponent, was more likely to be read by Christian communities for their support and reassurance. There is no evidence that emperors received and read any of the Christian apologies addressed to them. The primary themes of Christian apology were the unique truth of Christianity, the harmlessness and innocence of Christians, the folly of pagans, and animosity toward Jews. Apologetic literature also responded to accusations that Christianity was a threat to the state; they presented an ethical defense to charges of immorality; and they undertook philosophical explanation.

At the beginning of the second century, Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithnia in northern Asia Minor, wrote to the Emperor Trajan asking what to do about Christians. He inquired "whether the name itself should be punished, or only crimes attaching to that name."

> Meanwhile [he said] this is the course that I have adopted in the case of those brought before me as Christians. I ask them if they are Christians; if they admit it I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment; if they persist I sentence them to death. For I do not doubt that, whatever kind of crime it may be to which they have confessed, their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished.

But Christians only admitted to the most innocent activities. Puzzled by their denial of any crimes, Pliny said that he ordered the torture of two servants "who were called deaconesses [*ministrae*]."

> They revealed, however, only that they had been accustomed to assemble on a fixed day before daylight and sing a hymn to Christ as to a god; and that they bound themselves with an oath not for any crime, but to commit neither theft, nor robbery, nor adultery, not to break their word, and not to deny a deposit when demanded; after these things were done it was their custom to depart and meet together again to take food, but ordinary and harmless food; and they said that even this had ceased after my edict was issued, by which, according to your commands I had forbidden the existence of clubs.

Trajan agreed with Pliny's casualness in his dealings with Christians, not seeking them out for persecution, but condemning them to death if they were discovered and persisted in their stubborn error.

In North Africa, Tertullian's *Apology* (d. c.225) protested the unfairness of such treatment:

> If it is certain that we are the most wicked of men, why do you treat us so differently from all fellows, that is, from other criminals, it being only fair that the same crime should get the same treatment? When the charges made against us are made against others, they are permitted to make use of both their own lips and of hired pleaders to show their innocence. They have full opportunity of answer and debate; in fact, it is against the law to condemn anyone undefended and unheard. Christians alone are forbidden to say anything in exculpation of themselves, in defense of the truth, to help the judge to a righteous decision; all that is cared about is having what the public hatred demands – the confession of the name, not examination of the charge.
>
> (*Apology* II)

Christians were not accused of subversive or treasonous activities aimed at the overthrow of the Roman state after the late first century. Yet Christians maintained detachment from an Empire that required the full investment of its citizens' hopes and energies in political society. Christians claimed to be in the world but not *of* it. "We do not place our hopes in the present," Justin wrote. Second-century Christian apologists' demythologizing of the Roman state initiated a long process of secularization of the state that was formalized by Constantine in the fourth century. By legitimizing Christianity, along with other sects, cults, and religions, the so-called Edict of Milan (313) implicitly declared the state indifferent to religion. But in the second century, this was far in the future.

In all practical matters, Christian authors consistently advised the gospel injunction to "pay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar." Justin wrote, "We worship God alone, but in all other things we gladly obey you." Apologists emphasized repeatedly that Christians are good citizens, but they acknowledged that they did not support the idea that the state was a sacred entity and the supreme good of human life.

> When you hear that we look for a kingdom, you rashly suppose that we mean something merely human. But we speak of a kingdom with God, as is clear from our confessing Christ when you bring us to trial, though we know that death is the penalty for this confession.

> For if we looked for a human kingdom, we would deny it in order to save our lives, and would try to remain in hiding in order to obtain the things we look for. But since we do not place our hopes in the present order, we are not troubled by being put to death, since we will have to die somehow in any case.
>
> (Justin, *First Apology* 11)

Christian apologists were also called upon to defend other aspects of their faith and practice.

Ethical defense

Charges of moral depravity were often brought against Christians. Incest and cannibalism were the most frequent accusations. Tertullian in North Africa, and Athenagoras (fl. c.177), a Greek philosopher from the other end of the Mediterranean, responded to these charges. Tertullian's strategy was to take the offensive, accusing Romans of projecting their own crimes onto Christians. His *Apology* is flamboyant and vitriolic, the stuff of television courtroom drama. Tertullian thought that Romans' bloodthirstiness was responsible for their misunderstanding of Christians. He cited the time-honored Roman practice of exposing unwanted children (usually girls) to refute accusations that Christians eat babies. Murder is forbidden to Christians, Tertullian said; Christians are not even permitted to destroy the fetus in the womb (*Apology* 9). Moreover, Christians do not eat bloody meat. At their trials Christians were often offered sausages filled with blood – a Roman delicacy – as a test, since it was known that they would not eat them.

Perhaps the many accusations of cannibalism brought against Christians came from overhearing Christians speak of the bread and wine of the Christian eucharistic ritual as the body and blood of Christ. On the other hand, the charge of cannibalism was common to late antique mud slinging. The Roman Senate prohibited human sacrifice in 97 BCE, but both archeological and textual evidence reveals that human sacrifice continued into the common era in some places. The entrails of sacrificial victims were used to predict the future, and human sacrifices were thought to appease angry gods in times of disaster, famine, or plague. In the cult of Saturn, practiced primarily in the vicinity of Carthage in North Africa, children were sacrificed to appease the god or to seek an advantage. Numerous urns containing children's bones have been found, together with altars and sacrifice paraphernalia. Tertullian claimed that infant sacrifices were still performed in his own day, but there is no archeological evidence that such practices continued past the middle of the second century CE. Nevertheless, the recent reality of human sacrifice apparently provided a context in which accusations of cannibalism were credible to Christians' contemporaries.

A different kind of context is needed for assessing charges of incest and, more broadly, sexual immorality. Responding to these charges by going on the offensive, Tertullian, Justin, and Clement of Alexandria all cited infant exposure to claim that Romans frequently committed incest with their own unrecognized daughters. In the Roman world, the second largest source of slaves, next to children born of slave mothers, was exposed infants who, if they were rescued and raised, were almost always raised as slave prostitutes.

After considering evidence for Gnostic sects in Asia Minor, the Carpocratians and the Phibionites, historian Stephen Benko concluded that they practiced what he calls

"liturgical sex." Benko argued that libertinism was a strain in early Christianity, but that it was limited to a few sects who were vigorously ostracized from the mainstream by St Paul's purity injunctions. According to opponents' accounts, these acts were rationalized as actualizing the unity of Christ urged in Ephesians 1.3. Christian authors complained that their critics did not bother to differentiate among groups that called themselves Christian; activities that may have been done by one group were quickly assumed to be true of all Christians.

Remnants of libertinism may have persisted in the "holy kiss," a ritual greeting in Christian liturgies that symbolized the love of the brethren in Christian communities. Several second-century Christian authors acknowledged that the holy kiss was sometimes abused. Clement of Alexandria wrote:

> And if we are called to the kingdom of God, let us walk worthy of the kingdom, loving God and our neighbor. But love is not proved by a kiss, but by kindly feelings. But there are those that do nothing but make the churches resound with a kiss, not having love itself within. For this very thing, the shameless use of a kiss, which ought to be mystic, occasions foul suspicions and evil reports. The apostle calls the kiss holy. When the kingdom is worthily tested, we dispense the affection of the soul with a chaste and closed mouth, by which chiefly gentle manners are expressed. But there is another – unholy – kiss, full of poison, counterfeiting sanctity. Often kisses inject the poison of licentiousness.
>
> (*Paedegogus* 3.11)

Christians insisted on integrating body and senses in their worship. They believed strongly that the religion of the Incarnation should not be expressed in a bland, intellectual worship that excluded the life and energy that Christians experienced. Did Christians' neighbors misunderstand Christians' attempt to include the senses in their worship? We will continue to discuss the inclusion of bodies and senses in fourth-century liturgies, when more evidence exists.

Against general charges of immorality, Tertullian appealed to the Platonic maxim that virtue is a precondition of knowledge. One's behavior, he said, either enables or prevents accurate knowledge. Athenagoras' *Apology* agreed both that knowledge requires virtue, and that evidence of virtue is the best test of accurate and adequate knowledge.

> Who of those who analyze syllogisms, resolve ambiguities, explain etymologies, or teach homonyms, synonyms, predicates, axioms, and what the subject is and what the predicate – who of them have so purified their own hearts as to love their enemies instead of hating them; instead of upbraiding those who first insult them, to bless them; and to pray for those who plot against them? . . . With us, on the contrary, you will find unlettered people, tradesmen and old women who, though unable to express in words the advantages of our teachings, demonstrate by acts the value of their principles. For they do not rehearse speeches, but evidence good deeds. When struck, they do not strike back; when robbed, they do not sue; to those who ask, they give, and they love their neighbors as themselves.
>
> (Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 11)

According to Athenagoras, Christians who acted with integrity, even if they were unable precisely to articulate their beliefs, possessed real knowledge.

Christian morality must also be considered in relation to slavery in late antiquity. Slaves had no independent access to courts of law, they were not permitted social bonds

of kinship and, as has been mentioned, slaveholders had unlimited sexual access to their slaves. In the earliest extant Christian document, I Thessalonians 4. 3–8, Paul instructed his readers that sexual morality is essential to Christianity, but it is striking that he did not explicitly forbid slaveholders sexual access to their slaves. Sex between slaveholders and slaves was so conventional that it may not have been thought of as immoral, even in Christian communities.

Philosophical apologetic

The first Christian apologists to enter philosophical dialogue were Justin Martyr (d. c.165) and Athenagoras (d. after 177). For them, the question was not whether or not Christians should accept or reject philosophy, but whether the inevitable philosophical framework of Christian theology is acknowledged and self-critical, or implicit and unexamined. Tertullian famously asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" and he answered, "Nothing!" But he nevertheless used a Stoic framework to explain central theological ideas. Justin and Athenagoras, on the other hand, examined their philosophical assumptions both in order to clarify Christian self-understanding and to defend Christian faith to outsiders.

As Christian apologists began to engage in debate with philosophers and defenders of Roman religions, they realized that Christianity had no monopoly either on moral teachings or on doctrinal teachings like monotheism and creation. How did they account for this without surrendering ground to their opponents?

Justin posited a connection and continuity between Christian and non-Christian philosophers based on a "seed of reason" (*logos spermaticos*) within all human beings. He said that the seed of reason, dimly seen by philosophers, and clearly revealed in Jesus Christ, explains why Christians and non-Christian philosophers often understand the same truth. The rationality (*logos*) pre-existent in God was, Justin said, incarnated in Jesus Christ. He described the *logos* as intermediate between God and the world, a description that would prompt a heated debate in the fourth century. The *logos*, God's agent in creation, continues to be the means by which the human mind can know God. Justin wrote: "We adore and love *next to God* the *logos* derived from the increate and ineffable God, seeing that for our sakes he became human" (*Second Apology* 13.4). Justin believed that both the promises of the Hebrew Bible and the truths of the philosophers were fulfilled and completed in Christ.

Irenaeus and Tertullian had a different explanation for the awkward fact that there were good and wise people before there were Christians. Tertullian posited a natural law that provides all human beings with fundamental knowledge of the existence, goodness, and justice of God and with moral precepts. This primordial natural law, he said, is now "reformed for the better" in Christianity.

Once these affinities with philosophy had been identified, acknowledged, and placed in a Christian context, some serious intellectual objections to Christianity had to be met. For example, pagans accused Christians of teaching absurd myths. In Greek and Roman myths, the gods walk on earth among humans, but these myths had long since been allegorized and emancipated from anthropomorphic interpretations. Secular Romans found Christians' stories of Jesus of Nazareth, who was called the "son of God," very similar to their own ancient myths, but hopelessly naive in their literalism. Christians' belief that Jesus was born of a virgin also appeared to lack sophistication, if not basic medical information. And belief in the resurrection of body seemed at best misguided,

at worst an ignorant superstition, a confusion of two very different beliefs, immortality of the soul and the resurrection of body.

This objection, so intimately connected to fundamental differences between secular Romans and Christians over the meaning and value of bodies, was not adequately answered for centuries. Against the Platonic teaching that the soul is naturally immortal, Christians insisted that immortality of the soul was a gift from God, and that it was insufficient without the resurrection of body. "The soul participates in life because God wills it to live; thus it will not even have such participation when God no longer wills it to live." Athenagoras linked the bodily resurrection with creation. "Without the resurrection of body," he said, "the person would not be permanent as a person" (*The Resurrection of the Dead* XXV).

Apologists also emphasized the "reasonableness" of belief in bodily resurrection. Justin found a satisfying analogy in the massive physical changes human bodies undergo in conception and birth; why not, then, another massive change in a physical resurrection? As a Stoic, Tertullian believed the soul to be material, like body, although of a very fine substance. Since soul and body are essentially of the same substance, he said, they are bonded together in life and death; thus, resurrection of body is necessary if bodies are to participate in reward or punishment. Moreover, Tertullian wrote, absolute, final death is completely outside human experience and observation; we observe a world in which a rhythm of seasons, life and death, continually produces the death of the living and the birth of new forms of life. Most apologists, however, were content to simply invoke the power of God as full explanation for the resurrection of body.

Finally, pagans were critical of Christian teachings on grace, forgiveness, and salvation. Celsus, an early third century Platonist philosopher, summarized these objections: "Those who summon people to the other mysteries make this preliminary proclamation: 'Whoever has pure hands and a wise tongue, let him come.' But let us hear what folk these Christians call: 'Whoever is a sinner,' they say, 'whoever is unwise, whoever is a child, and, in a word, whoever is a wretch, the kingdom of God will receive him' " (*On the True Doctrine* IV). Non-Christian Romans found the lack of moral qualifications for Christian conversion unintelligible and irresponsible.

Along with adherents of other Roman religions, second-century Christians assumed the necessity of salvation, but they did not have a fully articulated *doctrine* of salvation. They believed and affirmed that, as Arnobius (d. c.330) later wrote, "Christ gave assistance in equal measure to the good and to the evil." The distinctive character of the Christian invitation was based on *need* rather than worth. Many eucharistic prayers and hymns also identified need and the response of gratitude as the essential ingredients of salvation.

Christian apology encouraged Christians in their beliefs and practices, but they relied on intellectual argument to do so. Images played a more intimate role in comforting and sustaining Christians in personal and communal crises. Later in this chapter we turn to the material evidence of Christian worship and devotion.

READINGS

The *Letters* of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch
The Martyrdom of Polycarp

The Martyrdom of SS Perpetua and Felicity
First Apology of Justin, the Martyr
Athenagoras, *A Plea Regarding Christians*
Tertullian, *Apology*

2 The First Theologians

Theology – the clarifying, defining, and organizing of ideas – occurs when people find ideas imprecise or when there is conflict over practices or liturgy. It then becomes necessary for the poetic language of scripture, liturgy, or devotion to be examined and explicated. The first efforts to examine and articulate beliefs took the form of polemic against rival Gnostic Christians. The tools employed in theological work will be discussed first, after which we will consider how the first theologians used these tools.

Theological tools: scripture

Second- and third-century Christians believed that scripture was not only exempt from error, but also that it contained nothing superfluous. They did not, however, agree on which writings should be included in scripture. Marcion (d. c.160), was the first Christian to work on a canon, or list of authoritative Christian scriptures. He was prompted to criticize Christian scriptures' account of Christ's birth as occurring in the normal human way by his repugnance for birth. Yet he acknowledged that human birth was essential to true humanity; thus he could not think of Christ as fully human. Against Marcion, Tertullian insisted in graphic detail on the reality of Christ's birth: "In loving humans," he said, God "loved the process of birth also, and human flesh." Marcion also wanted to exclude the Old Testament from the Christian canon. He believed that the God of the Old Testament created evil while the God of the Christian scriptures was the loving "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Marcion was excommunicated in 144. He started his own church, which spread rapidly and lasted for over a hundred years. Marcion's attacks on the Old Testament provoked Christian authors to identify a list of authorized Christian scriptures, but a consensus was still about a century and a half distant.

Justin Martyr was familiar with all four of the gospels, which he called "the memoirs of the apostles." Irenaeus (d. c.200) was the first to speak of a "New Testament" that paralleled the "Old Testament." Although the broad outline was settled by the beginning of the third century, the first official document listing the twenty-seven books of the New Testament (alone) as canonical was Athanasius's Easter Letter of 367. II Peter, II and III John, and Jude were absent from most lists of canonical books until the late third century. Hebrews was still under suspicion in the West; Revelation was excluded in Syria until the end of the fourth century; and the Western churches were silent about the book of James until the end of the fourth century. The main criterion for inclusion in the Christian canon was apostolicity; apostolicity and canon became almost synonymous terms. It was argued, for example, that II Peter, since written by an apostle, must be canonical. On the other hand, Hebrews, since it seemed clearly to deserve canonical status, must have been written by an apostle.

Descriptions of the inspiration of scripture varied widely. Some believed that the authors of scripture wrote in ecstatic states in which their own intellectual powers were suspended. Others, like Origen (d. 254) taught that the Holy Spirit enabled the authors of scripture to understand divine truth without suspending their own wills.

Tradition

For Irenaeus, the Christian scriptures were tradition, but tradition was not confined to scripture. Tradition was also handing on what Irenaeus simply called "life." In order to safeguard scripture against dissident interpretations, Irenaeus insisted that scripture belonged to the tradition originated by the apostles and that it could be accurately interpreted only within the Church. In the third century, however, it became important to define how the churches were connected to the apostles. This was done in three ways. First, Tertullian defined apostolicity as the continuity of doctrine:

> All doctrine that accords with those apostolic churches, the sources and originals of the faith, must be reckoned as the truth, since it preserves without doubt what the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God. . . . We are in communion with the apostolic churches; there is no difference of doctrine; this is the testimony of the truth.
>
> (*De praescriptione haereticorum* 21)

Second, Irenaeus claimed that the connection between apostolic times and the third century existed in a chain of personal acquaintance:

> Polycarp, who not only was taught by the apostles, and associated with many who had seen Christ, was also installed by apostles for Asia as bishop in the church in Smyrna – I saw him myself in my early youth – [he] survived for a long time and departed this life in a ripe old age by a glorious and magnificent martyrdom. He always taught what he learned from the apostles, which the Church continues to hand on . . .
>
> (*Adversus haereses*. III.iii.4.)

Third, Cyprian (d. 258) said that the continuity between apostles and the third century churches was guaranteed by a succession of bishops: "This unity we ought to hold and preserve, especially we who preside in the Church as bishops, that we may prove the episcopate to be one and undivided. . . .The episcopate is one; the individual members have each a part, and the parts make up the whole: (*De unitate ecclesiae* 5).

These descriptions of the continuity of Christian churches from the apostles to the third century arose in the context of conflict over the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Christian Gnosticism

Gnosticism was a broad and diverse movement. It had philosophical, Jewish, and Christian strains. Gnostics were considered heretical by their opponents, Christians who believed in the physical Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Until recently, historians have largely accepted this verdict. But the relatively recent (1945) discovery of the Nag Hammadi

Gnostic texts provides evidence on which to understand the teachings, religious sensibilities, and values of Christian Gnostics on their own terms.

Gnostic groups differed greatly from one another, but they held in common the belief that the human soul is a fragment of the divine imprisoned in an alien medium, bodies and the sensible world. They believed that the soul can be redeemed by realizing its greatness, a greatness resulting from its origin in the spiritual world. The redemption of the soul, for Gnostics, was *from* body and excluded body. When the soul is redeemed, the biodegradable body continues on its way to death and corruption, but without dragging the soul in its wake. The *Treatise on the Resurrection* states: "The visible members [of body] . . . shall not be saved; only the living members which exist within them will arise." Irenaeus reported that for the Gnostic Valentinus:

> The knowledge of the ineffable greatness is itself perfect redemption. . . . Knowledge is the redemption of the inner person. This, however, is not corporeal, since the body is corruptible; nor is it animal, since the soul is the result of a defect, and is, as it were, the habitation of the spirit. The redemption must therefore be spiritual; for they claim that the inner, spiritual person is redeemed through knowledge, that they possess the knowledge of the entire cosmos, and that this is true redemption.
>
> (*Adversus haereses.* I.xxi.4)

Gnostics believed that the world is the evil creation of an inferior god. Creation occurred when souls fell away from the spiritual world into mixture with matter. They held docetic beliefs about Christ's appearance on earth (from the Greek word *dokeo*, "I seem," or *doka*, vision, illusion, or fancy). According to Irenaeus, the Gnostic Basilides described Christ's Incarnation in the following way:

> Then the unborn and unnamed Father. . . . sent his first-begotten mind (and this is he they call Christ), for the freeing of them that believe in him from those who made the world. And he appeared to the nations of them as a man on the earth, and performed deeds of virtue. Wherefore he suffered not, but a certain Simon, a Cyrenian, was impressed to bear his cross for him; and Simon was crucified in ignorance and error, having been transfigured by him so that men would suppose him to be Jesus, while Jesus himself took on the appearance of Simon and stood by and mocked them. . . . If any therefore acknowledge the crucified, he is still a slave and subject to the power of them that made our bodies; but he that denies him is freed from them, and recognizes the ordering of the Unborn Father.
>
> (*Adversus haereses.* I.xxiii.4)

Gnostic teachings had two common characteristics. They claimed to have secret teachings beyond the recorded teachings of Christ and, according to their opponents, they taught that bodies held no religious or moral importance. Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian were eager to show that Gnostics' view of human bodies could equally dictate hedonism or asceticism. Body seen as mere obstacle to the spiritual life, and body as instrument of pleasure have fundamentally the same conception of body; both refuse to integrate and give religious meaning to body. In fact, most of the Gnostic groups were ascetic.

Gnostics had a pessimistic view of the sensible world, but an exhilarating view of the human soul. They posited a fundamental opposition between necessity, associated with body and the material world, and the freedom enjoyed by soul. Since liberation is always

experienced as liberation *from* an oppressor, Gnostics' claim to transcend body by identifying with spirit comprises the first "liberation theology." Emphasizing the pain of temporality and body's irreversible "progress" toward death, Gnostics sought to energize identification with the "true self," the soul. They extended St Paul's *experiential* dualism to a metaphysical dualism. Many Gnostic hymns have been preserved; they express Gnostics' passionate yearning to be reunited with their home in the spiritual world.

Gnostic Christians believed that bodies and the sensible world are evil. Christians who believed in Christ's real incarnation rejected this explanation of evil, finding it incompatible with belief in creation by God, the Incarnation, and the doctrine of a bodily resurrection. Nevertheless, incarnationist Christians had to account for the existence of evil. The philosophical answer sometimes used, namely, that evil exists to provide a contrast or foil for good so that good can be recognized was, however, less than existentially satisfying.

In the third century, incarnationist Christians' extensive treatment of the role of the devil and demons answered the need to identify and localize the forces of evil. For them, the devil and his demonic hosts were not quaint mythology but existing and active entities, the source of evil and harm. While contemporary secular authors and Jews referred to demons casually, Christian authors, by contrast, found demons essential as an explanation of evil. In contrast to the classical Roman hypothesis that illness was caused by an imbalance of humors within the body, Christians found the cause of illness in the devil and demons, forces external to the person.

An alternative to Gnostic's necessary and permanent evil, demons and the devil were understood as temporary and contingent. They were real enough to cause effects, but they were also ultimately manageable since Christ had already overcome the devil. Thus Christians could cope, for now, and await a final promised victory over the devil and evil. Irenaeus's *Adversus haereses* (*Against the Heresies*) concludes with a lengthy and detailed description of demons' activities.

Irenaeus (d. c.200)

Irenaeus was the first Christian author to articulate a comprehensive picture of human life in its cosmic setting. His concerns were not primarily philosophical, but pastoral; he considered an accurate orientation to history and the cosmos essential for living as a Christian. *Against the Heresies*, in which "each one preaches himself," Irenaeus set Christianity within a narrative that made its basic principles accessible.

Irenaeus described the theologian's task:

> Having more understanding does not mean that people can change the basic idea [of Christian faith]. . . . but it consists in *working out* the things that have been said in parables and building them into the foundation of the faith; in *expounding* the activity of God for the sake of humankind . . . in *showing clearly how* . . . in *declaring* . . . in *showing why* . . . in *teaching* . . . in *unfolding* . . . in *not being silent* . . .
>
> (*De haer.* I.10.2)

Irenaeus can be called a systematic theologian in that he sought to demonstrate the cohesiveness and comprehensiveness of Christian faith. But he was also aware of

another, equally important, theological task, that is, to provide an evocative theology that provokes response, focuses energy, and organizes life.

Irenaeus distrusted "skillful language." Because Gnostic leaders attracted "simple hearers" through their flowery rhetoric, Irenaeus claimed, by contrast, to be unable and unwilling to use "power in writing," and "beauties of language and style." Rather, he said, "I write to you out of love, plainly and simply and truly." His claim was, of course, also a rhetorical strategy, for Irenaeus was adept in the use of rich and subtle imagery, strong and moving language, and powerful constructions of ideas.

His theology revolved around a powerful insight, namely, that human life can only *go on* from the place at which it was arrested. Late in the nineteenth century, Freud rediscovered this insight, applying it to individuals. In clinical psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic practice, the individual remembers and re-experiences the trauma that has paralyzed intellect and deadened feeling. In this process, the repetitiously reinforced pattern of painful and destructive behavior can be dislodged so that psychic life can resume.

Irenaeus described the human race as a whole in this predicament. The disobedience of Adam had traumatized the human race, arresting development, freezing response, and deadening feeling. Christ, the new Adam, reenacted the original crisis situation, the temptation to be one's own god. Adam's response had been to succumb to this temptation, to use his freedom for disobedience; Christ's response was obedience. Because of his solidarity with human beings, by returning to the primal situation and reversing the human response, Christ effectively overcame the human race's deadness, making it possible for human beings to be, in the words of a fourth-century eucharistic prayer, "truly alive."

Recapitulation

Irenaeus used Paul's theory of recapitualation to develop this insight. He began with God, who is "rich, complete, and in need of nothing," containing all things in Godself. Adam, though created in the image and likeness of God, was still, in Paradise, an undeveloped child.

> God made man lord of the earth. . . . but he was small, being but a child. He has to grow and reach full maturity. . . . God prepared a place for him better than this world, a paradise of such beauty and goodness that the Word of God constantly visited it, and walked and talked with man. . . . But man was a child, and his mind was not yet fully mature; and thus he was easily led astray by the deceiver.
>
> (*Apostolic Preaching* 12)

Intended to use his freedom to advance toward closer resemblance to God, Adam, through weakness and immaturity instead disobeyed and lost his likeness to God, although he retained the image of God consisting of reason and free will.

Irenaeus was the first theologian to sketch an idea of what would later be called "original sin." "Through the disobedience of that one man who was first formed out of the untilled earth, the many were made sinners and *lost life*." Just as human beings fell through their solidarity with Adam, they are restored through solidarity with Christ, the

second Adam. Christ recapitulates or "sums up" all things in himself: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, in his boundless love, *became what we are that he might make us what he himself is*."

Irenaeus emphasized the continuity between creation and redemption. He described redemption as a process of growth. Adam's sin disturbed the growth of the human race at a formative stage in the childhood of the race; Christ made growth possible. Irenaeus identified three stages of growth: infancy, maturity, and deification. He emphasized Christ's incarnation and *life* as salvific, not his death.

> He was thirty years old when he came to be baptized. Then, having reached the required age for a teacher, he came to Jerusalem, that all should have a fair opportunity to hear his teaching. He did not appear to be other than what he really was, as they say who hold that his appearance was illusory. No, he appeared as he really was. Thus, as a teacher, he was of a teacher's age; he did not reject humanity nor go beyond its limitations; he did not abrogate the laws for humanity in his own case. Rather he sanctified each stage of life by making possible a likeness to himself. He came to save all through his own person, all, that is, that through him are reborn to God; infants, children, adolescents, young people and old. Therefore he passed through every stage of life. He was made an infant for infants, sanctifying infancy; a child among children, sanctifying childhood, . . . a young man among young men. . . . So also he was a grown man among older men, that he might be a perfect teacher for all, not merely in respect of revelation of the truth, but also in respect of this stage of life. . . . And thus he came even to death, that he might be the first-born from the dead . . . the author of life, who goes before all and shows the way.
>
> (*Adv. haer*. II.22)

Irenaeus used many verbs of process: increase; gain; endure; obey; discipline; grow; progress; persevere, mount: all these occur in a single paragraph (*Adv. haer*. IV.38).

For Irenaeus, the whole process of sin and salvation is necessary. Even evil is necessary and has a positive function within the process: "When God showed his kindness, we learned the good of obedience and the evil of disobedience; our minds perceived *by experience* the distinction between good and evil. . . . How could they be trained in the good without knowledge of its contrary?" (*Adv. haer*. IV.19).

Irenaeus rejected Gnostics' claim that knowledge itself is essential and efficacious. In place of their intricate metaphysical knowledge, Irenaeus insisted on participation and growth in Christ as a practical, daily form of salvation. Human beings "cannot know God in his greatness, for the Father cannot be measured, but by participating in God's love, we ever learn in obeying God." In short, Irenaeus accused Gnostics of knowing too much about God.

> [They] call God indescribable and unnamable and then, as if they had assisted at God's birth, they talk largely about the production and generation of his first begetting. . . . It is not our duty to indulge in conjecture and make guesses about infinite things . . . the knowledge of such matters is to be left to God.
>
> (*Adv. haer*. III.24)

The struggle between Christian Gnostics and incarnationist Christians was a debate among self-identified Christians. The duration, intensity, and acrimony of the struggle demonstrates that Christ's actual body was central to the solidarity incarnationist

Christians experienced with Christ. For incarnationists, a purely spiritual savior could not save. Against the "spirituality" movement of the second century, incarnationist Christians like Irenaeus and Tertullian insisted on the human birth and life of Jesus Christ. Pressured on the one hand by persecution and martyrdom and, on the other hand, by Gnosticism, Christians were forced to decide what they thought about the body's role in redemption. This question prompted the first theological work.

READINGS

Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Book V
Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics*
Nag Hammadi, *The Gospel of Truth*

Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215)

Clement, bishop of Alexandria at the beginning of the third century, was distressed by the "popularization" of Christian ideas that had led to a bewildering plurality and variety of interpretations. His own writings reflected Christianity's complexity and sophistication: "There are some things which my work will speak in riddles; to some it will display its meaning clearly; some things it will only suggest; it will try to say things secretly, to display in a hidden fashion, to show while keeping silence." According to Clement, Christianity contained precious esoteric knowledge, difficult to access and understand. He tried to shelter this knowledge from interpretations by people who either lacked education or were unprepared by their moral lives to understand it in depth.

Clement's theology occurred in a different location, mood, and social setting from that of the *Actae of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, and even Justin's *Apology*. In Clement's theology, preoccupation with an immanent return of Christ to the earth or with the personal apocalypse of martyrdom changed to interest in the *process* of Christian life. The earliest Christians believed that they would not need to carry on for long. Their writings described Jesus, not as the rational *logos* of the apologists, but as breaking the power of the demons and ushering in a new age, last days. But by the third century, if Christians were not to lose hope when Christ did not appear as expected, a change of orientation was needed. The first Christian literature that focused on practicing Christianity over a lifetime came from Alexandria.

In fact, settling down to practicing Christianity with the expectation of a normal lifespan was premature. Empire-wide fierce persecution was yet to come, as the Decian persecution in the middle of the third century and the Diocletian persecution early in the fourth century brought unprecedented terror and suffering. Premature or not, however, attention to daily Christian living represented a significant change of perspective in Christian literature. Clement's writings examined in detail what could be integrated in a Christian life and what needed to be excluded.

Christians in Alexandria

By the end of the second century a wealthy and flourishing Christian community existed in Alexandria. It had seldom been persecuted and had already moved from house

churches to buildings built especially for worship. Under these conditions of relative stability the Egyptian church committed itself to the instruction of catechumens, polemics against Gnostic rivals, and theological construction.

This work was carried on at the famous catechetical school of Alexandria. The school, open to both sexes and all ages, trained converts according to their intellects and abilities. There was a short course and a long course. The short course consisted of memorizing and reciting the facts of the creed. The long course included philosophical and theological instruction.

Third-century theological education was divided into three parts. The first part aimed at strengthening the student's ability to observe and reason by the study of geometry, physiology, and astronomy. The second stage consisted of philosophy; the classical poets and philosophers were studied, especially Plato. The second stage culminated in ethics, which was taught as discussions of definitions of good and evil, justice, and virtue. In the third stage, theology was the subject. The first two stages were preparation for studying theology.

Clement was the second principal of the catechetical school. His emphasis on living the Christian *life* came from his belief that Christ's promised return had already taken place with the coming of Jesus, the *logos* made flesh. He was the first Christian author to describe Christian life, faithfully lived, as equal in value to martyrdom.

Clement's theology

Clement's theology had two mutually dependent foci, the establishment of Christian theology as the apex and goal of classical philosophy, and moral and ascetic teachings. In the context of the catechetical school, Clement wanted to correct *both* what he saw as the stubbornly unreflecting faith of simple "Jesus believers," and sophisticated intellectuals' attraction of to Gnostics' secret knowledge. He also wanted to modify what he considered Christians' exaggerated respect for Greek philosophy. He taught that all Greek wisdom was learned from the so-called "barbarians," non Greek-speaking northern European tribes that were little known and consistently feared and vilified by Mediterranean people. But Clement himself was learned in Platonic philosophy. Thus, rather than renouncing it, he positioned philosophy as a "preparatory discipline" to the study of Christian theology; Greek philosophy was to be the "handmaiden" of theology.

Clement taught that faith and knowledge are mutually interdependent. Faith is sufficient for salvation, but the mature Christian, whom Clement (confusingly) called the "true gnostic," must seek a higher understanding. His doctrine of redemption highlights the intellect: "It was to us who had strayed *in our minds* that the Savior came." A "true gnostic's" knowledge differed from that of Gnostics in that Clement did not picture a series of cosmic emanations and falls from the world of pure spirit. His doctrine of God, his understanding of Christ (Christology), and his anthropology all rest on the doctrine of creation.

Clement's treatise "On Spiritual Perfection" (*Stromateis* VII) described a cosmic order in which the universe, created by the power of the *logos*, depends on "one original principle." It is a graded, rank-ordered series, reaching from the original principle to "the first and second and third gradations and so, even down to ourselves, ranks below ranks are appointed, all saving and being saved by the instrumentality of the One." All things come from the One. There is no second source. In his theology, cosmic hierarchy

replaced Gnostic dualism. Clement used Plato's metaphor of a magnet attracting iron rings to describe the Holy Spirit's power of attraction.

Those who choose virtue and contemplation are irresistibly drawn to "the highest mansion." Progress toward God consists of beginning where one is – in the lower ranks of creation – to discipline the mind by knowledge and the body by virtue, and thus to move up the ranks to "that which is lovely." But not everyone chooses to undertake the ascent. The two causes of inertia are ignorance and weakness. To overcome ignorance, Christ revealed true philosophy: "That which the chief of philosophy (Plato) merely guessed at, the disciples of Christ have both apprehended and proclaimed." Weakness can be overcome by ascetic disciplines.

Clement's use of Platonic philosophy is evident in his anthropology. He pictured humans as dual, made up of body and soul, and ill at ease in composite form. The life-long task of the "true gnostic" is to cultivate the soul's liberation from the body's necessities. This definition of humanity led Clement dangerously close to docetism, the belief that Jesus Christ came to earth in appearance only. Clement affirmed the real flesh of Christ, but it played little part in his theology of redemption:

> In the case of the Savior it would be absurd to suppose that his body demanded [food, drink, sleep, etc.] for his stay [on earth]. For he ate, not because of bodily needs, since his body was supported by holy power, but so that his companions might not entertain a false notion about him, as in fact certain men did later, namely that he had been manifested only in appearance. He himself was, and remained "untroubled by passion;" no movement of the passions, either pleasure or pain, found its way into him.
>
> (*Stromateis* VI.9)

Clement said that sin was not transmitted from Adam and Eve through reproduction. That interpretation, he said, assumes a Gnostic principle of substantial evil. There is no inherited pollution, and it would be incompatible with the Incarnation to consider the body evil. Nevertheless, embodiment is distracting, due to its vulnerability and finitude that obscure soul's clarity of vision. Body is, however, a perfect *tool* for soul's learning.

> Without the body how could the divine plan for us achieve its end? Surely the Lord himself . . . came in the flesh. . . . [And] does not the Savior who heals the soul also heal the body of its passions? But if the flesh were hostile to the soul, Christ would not have raised an obstacle to the soul by strengthening with good health the hostile flesh.
>
> (*Stromateis* III.17)

Commenting on Plato's famous phrase, *soma/sema* ("body is the tomb of soul)," Clement says that body has the potential for being *either* tomb or temple. If the passions that humans have "because of the body" are not to capture the soul's energy and "bind it with the fetters of the flesh," one's mind must be disciplined by knowledge and one's body by ascetic practices.

What did Clement mean by "asceticism"? Later ascetics who sometimes engaged in body-damaging practices are not typical of most Christian asceticism. For Clement, as for classical authors, the primary areas of human life in which asceticism should be practiced were diet and sex. His objection to sex was Aristotle's objection, namely that while

engaged in sexual activity, one simply doesn't *think* well! Yet it was not sex itself that Clement found problematic, but being "under the *control of the passions*."

Clement reasoned that Christ gave Christians "free and sovereign power and has allowed us to live *as we choose*." He shared with philosophers and Gnostics a horror of automatic, socialized behavior. But humans' freedom does not imply that behavior is morally indifferent; "how is it possible to become like the Lord and have knowledge of God if one is *subject* to physical pleasure?" The key word is "subject." The best contemporary translation is "compulsive." He quoted Plato: "I escaped from sexuality as if I had escaped from a wild and raging tyrant," adding, "let us not call *bondage* to pleasure freedom, as if bitterness were sweet."

Thus far, Clement's and Aristotle's ideas of sex are indistinguishable. The specifically Christian element in Clement's teaching came from his insistence that Christian asceticism is God-given; it is not a matter of teeth-gritting will power: "the soul that has to concentrate upon endurance is lost." Recourse to will power defeats the purpose of freeing a person from compulsive behavior for one must still focus on (avoiding) the compulsive action. Like the courage to suffer martyrdom for the faith, celibacy is God's gift. "Our aim is not that when a person feels desire, he should get the better of it." Rather, the aim of asceticism, whether celibacy or marriage, is *integration*: "In us it is not only the spirit that ought to be sanctified, but also our behavior, manner of life, and our body" (*Stromateis* III.7). Far from rejecting sex, Clement favored marriage as an optimum condition for learning.

> True manhood is shown not in the choice of a celibate life; on the contrary, the prize in the contest of men is won by him who has trained himself in the discharge of the duties of husband and father and by the supervision of a household, regardless of pleasure and pain – by him, I say, who in the midst of his solicitude for his family shows himself inseparable from the love of God and rises superior to every temptation which assails him through children and wife and slaves and possessions. . . . *He who has no family is in most respects untried.*
>
> (*Stromateis* III.70; emphasis added)

Clement's *Paedagogus* (Instructor, or Teacher) painstakingly discussed many aspects of Christian comportment, finding little that is indifferent to Christian life. Clement was the only Christian author of his time who gave advice on men's, as well as women's, dress. He advised on the Christian way to eat, drink, walk, sit, and behave at banquets. His advice on the Christian way of sitting for men is: "Let them not have their feet crossed, nor place one thigh on another, nor apply the hand to the chin. For it is vulgar not to bear oneself without support . . . and perpetually moving and changing one's position is a sign of frivolousness." Even sneezing should be done in the Christian way:

> If anyone is attacked with sneezing, just as in the case of hiccup, he must not startle those near him with the explosion, and so give proof of his bad breeding; but the hiccup is to be quietly transmitted with the expiration of the breath, the mouth being composed becomingly, and not gaping and yawning like the tragic masks. . . . In a word, the Christian is characterized by composure, tranquility, calmness, and peace.
>
> (*Paedagogus* II.7)

Although such instructions may strike us as humorous, Clement's attention to behavior was similar to classical philosophers' fascination with the practices that create a carefully chosen and cultivated self. Like his contemporaries, Clement believed that a chosen self was a male prerogative. As in the catechetical school, women were not excluded, but if they participated they were thought of as "becoming male," and there is no evidence that any women undertook the long course of instruction. His project was nothing less than the construction of "the Christian body," part of his theology of integration – cosmic, intellectual, and practical.

Christian life included self-discipline, but only for the sake of *more life*. Clement advocated asceticism for freeing one from *attachment* to pleasures. But he criticized Gnostics for setting "too ascetic a tone;" they proclaim, he wrote, "the necessity of continence on the ground of opinions which . . . arise from hatred of what God has created." For Clement, hatred of creation does not provide an adequate stimulus for learning. Quite the opposite: "Starting with admiration for creation which he brings with him as evidence for this capacity to receive knowledge, he becomes an eager disciple of the Lord. . . . His *admiration prompts him to believe*. Proceeding from this point he does his best to learn in every way" (*Stromateis* VII.11).

Admiration requires freedom, and the condition of freedom is detachment: "We ought to behave as strangers and pilgrims . . . as people who are not passionately attached to the created world but use it with all gratitude and with a sense of exaltation beyond it." The sensible world, riches, and the bodily beauty of one's friends can be enjoyed with gratitude when all of human life is ordered to "Life itself." The quality of life as spiritual discipline is joy. "Throughout the day and night one is filled with joy, uttering and doing the precepts of the Lord. Not only at dawn, on rising, and at midday, but also when walking and lying down, dressing and undressing . . . carrying God within and being carried by God" (*Stromateis* VII.12).

The final objective of Christian life is deification: "The Word of God became human that you may learn from him how it may be that humans can become God." Clement put daily advance in the place of apocalyptic expectations. Meantime, he says, we live joyously: "all our life is a festival; being persuaded that God is everywhere present on all sides we praise him as we till the ground, we sing hymns as we sail the sea, we feel God's inspiration in all that we do."

READING

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, Books III and VII

Origen of Alexandria (d. 254)

Two of the most interesting men of the third century, Plotinus and Origen, were taught by the same teacher, Ammonius Sacchas, of whom little is known. The Platonic philosopher Plotinus (d. 270) focused and developed the mystical strain of Platonism. His influence has extended through medieval Christian thought to Renaissance thinkers and beyond them to our own time. The Christian Origen (d. 254) developed a highly

influential method of scriptural exegesis and a distinctive theology. His method of scriptural interpretation established the importance of reason in Christian faith. He also continued and extended the work of Irenaeus and Clement in describing a cosmic and temporal setting for human existence.

Origen's life

Most of the details of Origen's life come from the fourth century historian, Eusebius. After several generations in which there were no persecutions in Alexandria, and churches had become large and secure, the Severan persecution broke out in 202. Origen's father was martyred, along with many other Christians. According to Eusebius, the young Origen's zeal to share his father's martyrdom was so great that his mother hid all his clothes so that he could not leave the house. At this time, Clement was head of the catechetical school in Alexandria. When Clement died in 215, Origen became head at the age of eighteen. At least seven of his pupils were martyred. He visited them in prison; he was in court when they were tried; he embraced them when they were about to be executed; and he accompanied their bodies to the cemetery, and then returned to resume his teaching.

Later, Origen expressed nostalgia for those "good old days." It used to be easier, he said, to tell who was a real Christian and who was not.

> Those were the days when Christians really were faithful, when the noble martyrdoms were taking place, when after conducting the martyrs' bodies to the cemetery we returned to meet together, and the entire church was present without being afraid, and the catechumens were being catechized during the very time of the martyrdom and while people were dying who had confessed the truth unto death. . . . Then we knew and saw wonderful and miraculous signs. Then there were true believers, few in number but faithful, treading the straight and narrow way that leads to life. But now when we have become many, out of the multitude that profess piety there are extremely few who are attaining to the election of God and to blessedness.
>
> (*Homily in Jeremiah* 4.3)

Origen wrote these words in a period of peace before the outbreak of persecution in which he was imprisoned, tortured, and subsequently died of his injuries.

Origen was an enthusiast, an ascetic, and a passionate Christian. Eusebius reported that he castrated himself in order to be undistracted by sexual desire. However, Origen's own exegesis of Matthew 19.12 ("some have even made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven") makes this doubtful. This passage, Origen said, is clearly one that has no literal interpretation, but only a spiritual sense. Yet some Christian men either strongly considered or actually practiced this extreme measure, for church councils well into the fourth century repeatedly forbade self-castration. Clearly, some zealous third-century Christians considered management of sexuality critically important to a Christian life.

Like Irenaeus and Clement, Origen explored the complex implications of Christian faith. He was influential in three areas: 1) biblical exegesis; 2) speculative theology; and 3) Christian piety. Yet in spite of the tremendous influence of his method of scriptural exegesis, he was never sainted or given the title "doctor of the church," for his theology came under suspicion at the end of the fourth century and was formally condemned by three Councils. His writings were subsequently largely destroyed, surviving only in

Greek fragments and Latin translations. Methodius, his contemporary, accused him of teaching the eternity of creation, the pre-existence of souls, and that the resurrection body is spiritual. Methodius said that Origen taught that since the circle is the perfect shape the resurrection body will be spherical. The fragmented condition of his writings makes it impossible to tell whether he actually taught the doctrines ascribed to him.

Origen himself was strongly concerned with orthodoxy. "My wish," he wrote, "is to be truly a man of the church, to be called by the name of Christ and not by the name of any heretic, to have this name which is blessed over all the earth. I desire to be, and to be called, a Christian in my works as in my thoughts." Despite the condemnation of his theology, Origen had an influence on Christian thought comparable to that of Augustine or Thomas Aquinas. He learned Hebrew in order to consult with contemporary rabbis about historical and linguistic problems. He worked for 40 years on an edition of the Hebrew Bible, the *Hexapla*, in which the Hebrew text, a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew text, and four different Greek versions of the text were arranged in parallel columns. He also presented double commentaries on many texts in the Jewish manner. His massive *corpus* of expositions of scripture includes close to a thousand titles.

Scriptural exegesis

Origen used two methods of scriptural interpretation whose goal was to reveal scriptures' richness of meaning, typology, and allegory. Typology refers to the interpretation of characters and events from the Old Testament as types, or symbols of characters and events in the Christian scriptures. For example, Adam was a type of Christ, the "second Adam." Typology provided the basis for a "supersessionist" theology that understood history as the progressive unfolding of God's redemptive purpose, begun in the Jewish people, and continued and completed in Christianity. In this view, Christianity has superseded, or taken the place of, Judaism so that Judaism no longer exists as an independent religion. Throughout Christian history, many authors, even those who, like Origen, respected Jews and learned from them, subscribed to supersessionist theology. For example, Augustine stated, "The whole content of [Hebrew] scriptures is either directly or indirectly about Christ." After Christ's coming, he said, Jews became "a desk for the Christians, bearing the law and the prophets, and testifying to the doctrine of the Church" (*Contra Faustum Manichaean* XII.7. 23). Supersessionist theology has been decisively criticized and rejected only in the later half of the twentieth century.

The second method of scriptural exegesis Origen introduced was allegory, a method introduced by the first-century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria. Origen taught that the *whole* of scripture, not only certain difficult passages, has several layers of meaning. Scripture often uses figurative language, he said, that cannot be taken literally. He explained his system of interpretation and his reasons for it in *On First Principles*.

> There are three ways in which the meaning of the Holy Scriptures should be inscribed in the soul of every Christian. First, the simpler sort are edified by what may be called the "body" of scripture. . . . Secondly, those who have made some progress are edified by, as it were, the "soul." Thirdly, the perfect . . . are edified by the "spiritual" law. . . . Thus, as a person consists of body, soul, and spirit, so also does the scripture which is the gift of God designed for human salvation.
>
> (*On First Principles* I.11.4)

The "body" of scripture contains the literal or historical meaning; the "soul" carries the moral lesson to be gathered from the passage; the "spirit" conveys the spiritual meaning. The "simple" are capable of understanding the moral sense when it is pointed out to them. For example, the moral meaning of Paul's statement in I Corinthians 9.9, "Thou shalt not muzzle the threshing ox," applies, Origen said, to the right of Christian teachers to financial support. Little of the literal or moral senses appear, however, in Origen's writings. Origen thought the spiritual meaning was by far the most interesting and important.

Origen taught that the Holy Spirit has buried rich truths in scripture to instruct those who are in the process of ascent. The spiritual sense requires a skilled interpreter, for it must be consistent with the whole of Christian teaching. Origen repeated Irenaeus' insistence that tradition was the only trustworthy key to interpreting scripture. He believed that the Holy Spirit deliberately placed difficulties and impossibilities in scripture in order to make people search diligently for the deeper meanings.

Preoccupied with the richness of scripture, Origen thought it quite impossible for any scripture to have *only* literal or historical meaning. He wrote, the "*logos* is incarnate in the flesh of the holy text." He thought of scripture as a vast ocean or forest, limited only by the interpreter's ability. He taught that the interpretation of scripture was a grace or "charisma." When the interpreter's whole being is absorbed, and every faculty exercised, in understanding the scripture, the interpreter enters a spiritual passion in which interpreter and object are united.

Origen's theology Origen believed that, taken literally, the Bible contained too much human activity and too little about spiritual cosmic forces. He said that the gospels *conceal* the eternal Christ within the life and record of the historical Jesus. His theology focused on the supernatural plane, sharing philosophers' and Gnostics' excitement with bold visionary and speculative constructions, relating human life to universal space and endless time. He believed that human minds are capable of grasping truth simultaneously in personal, historical, and cosmic dimensions.

Origen's theology began with the premise that on "points not clearly set forth in scripture," speculation is appropriate. However, speculation should be subject to two limitations: nothing may be attributed to God that is incompatible with scriptural descriptions of God's goodness; and "we must be careful always to strive to preserve reverence to God and Christ and to avoid subordinating reverence to intellectual inquiry" (*On First Principles* III.1.17).

Origen began with God, the source and summit of the chain of being – "the fount from which originates all intellectual existence or mind." Using a popular Platonic metaphor, he pictured God as the sun whose first, most immediate splendor or ray, is Christ. The Holy Spirit is the brightness of God at second remove. A hierarchy within God is evident in this description as in Origen's instruction that Christians should pray *to* God *through* Christ.

Before the creation of bodies and the sensible world, God surrounded Godself with "a world of pure minds;" *this* was God's intentional creation. But the pure minds "were seized with surfeit of the divine love and contemplation and turned toward the worse." Origen speaks of a "cooling" of the attraction by which the minds clung to God. This process, once begun, became a "gradual sinking, a decline by degrees." The fall away

from the One introduced diversity: "By reason of the faculty of free will, variety and diversity had taken hold of individual souls, so that one was attached to its author by a warmer and another with a weaker or feebler love." However, the fall, caused by the individual will, can also be reversed by the will.

The creation of the sensible world followed automatically from "what the minds had already done with themselves." "In proportion to their particular sins they were enveloped in bodies as a punishment, either finer in substance or grosser, ethereal, aerial, or fleshly." The devil fell farther than the other minds, but his place at the outer reaches of being is not permanent. Origen did not believe in divine punishment; rather, "Each sinner kindles for himself the flame of his own fire and is not plunged into a fire that had been previously kindled by someone else or which existed before him. Of this fire, the food and material are our sins." Individuals are disposed to good or evil through upbringing and the influence of environment as well as by Adam's example.

For Origen, punishment and "learning experiences" were identical. Learning, which began with the soul's fall into a body, is temporary and remedial: "This training of ours in the body extends over a very long period, namely up till the time the bodies themselves with which we are encompassed are found worthy of incorruption and immortality" (*On First Principles* II.3.2). God brings fire into the world, Origen wrote, "as the benefactor of them who stand in need of the discipline of fire." This purifying fire is "chastisement and healing at the same time." He said that scriptural descriptions of punishment are not to be taken literally except "in order to terrify those who cannot by any other means be saved from the fire of their sins" (*On First Principles* II.10.4).

Origen's universe was *dynamic*, constantly in motion. Free will, which originally initiated mind's descent into body, continues to determine its cosmic position. "The will's freedom always moves in the direction either of good or of evil, nor can the rational sense ever exist without some movement." Origen's universe was also a *connected* universe: "All rational natures, including God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all angels, authorities, dominions and other powers, and even human beings by virtue of the soul's dignity are of one substance, of one nature, but of different wills." The temporal world is not immense enough to contain this process. Origen envisioned a "cycle of worlds" in which human souls are moved by their own momentum, and "last judgments," far from final, are simply the impetus for new movement. There *is* an end, Origen said, a great last judgment which will annihilate matter and restore the perfect unity of the original creation in which "God shall be all and in all." But he also suggested that perhaps the end is not really the *end*. A new falling away will occur; free will requires it, and the process will begin again.

Piety

How did Origen understand redemption? The incarnation of Christ was necessary, he said, because "no created being can approach God without a guide." Christ's redemptive work broke humans' fall, interrupting the downward momentum and reversing its direction. By identification with Christ, Christians can begin the long climb. Christ's real humanity was able to bind together "both the weakness of human flesh and the willingness of the spirit." Origen was the first theologian to emphasize the human soul of Christ as the faculty that connected God and humanity: "[Of] this soul, then, acting as a medium between God and the flesh (for it was not possible for the nature of God

to mingle with a body apart from some medium) there is born the God-man, the medium being, that existence to whose nature it was not contrary to assume a body."

Origen's homilies exemplify early Christian preaching. They demonstrate his emotional love for the human Jesus, sharer of human burdens, yet in a unique way suffering *productively* to release human beings from the power of death. Origen's God is not an unchanging, unfeeling God. "All who wish to follow Christ can do so, though overcome by death, since death has now no strength against them; for no one who is with Jesus can be seized by death. . . . He does away with the irrationality and deadness in us" (*Commentary On John* I. 20).

Origenism

Origen's writing and his passionately committed life exemplified his statement, "He does away with the irrationality and deadness in us." Yet by the end of the fourth century, "Origenism" came to be seen as a heresy. The following teachings, ascribed to Origen, were condemned: the pre-existence of souls; the subordination of the second and third persons of the trinity; universal salvation (which prohibited belief in a permanent afterlife of reward or punishment); denial of the identity of mortal and resurrection bodies; and metempsychosis, or transmigration of souls. "Origenism" was condemned by a Council in Alexandria in 400; the condemnation was reiterated by a Council in Constantinople in 543 and again by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553.

Yet Origen's influence was enormous. The medievalist Beryl Smalley said, "To write a history of Origenist influence on the West would be tantamount to writing a history of western exegesis."

READING

Origen, *On First Principles*, Books I and II

Trinitarian controversy in the second and third centuries

One of the most central Christian beliefs was belief that God is triune, but strenuous efforts to find an acceptable description of the trinity continued for a century and a half. Our understanding of trinitarian debates is complicated by the fact that geographical and linguistic diversity makes it difficult to differentiate positions that seem very similar. Proposed descriptions of the trinity not only use different languages – Greek or Latin – but they also use different metaphors, models, and images. The debates were intense because the stakes were high. How was Christ, through whom Christians received salvation, related to God?

The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* describes the trinity as a mystery; it can "neither be known by unaided human reason nor cogently demonstrated by reason after it has been revealed." Yet trinitarian controversy was not "academic," meaning (in current public usage), of no practical importance. The various trinitarian positions featured different emotional, psychological, and political perspectives. The way the trinity was conceptualized also intimately affected preaching and prayer.

Before we discuss trinitarian positions, trinitarian and Christological controversies, though related, must be distinguished. Trinitarian debates concerned the relationships within and among the persons of the trinity; they were attempts to understand and articulate God's unity in three persons. Until the end of the fourth century, the relationship of Father and Son focused the debate. The Holy Spirit was not definitively integrated into the Creed until the Council of Constantinople (381). Christological debates occurred a bit later, and were focused on the relationship of human and divine in Jesus Christ.

From the earliest writings, Christians affirmed that Christ the Redeemer was God, not a lower order of being. The earliest surviving sermon after the New Testament began: "Brethren, we ought to think of Jesus Christ as of God, as the judge of living and dead." The earliest martyrdom account, that of Polycarp, said, "It will be impossible for us to forsake Christ. . . . For him, being the son of God we adore, but the martyrs we cherish." The earliest outsider comment on the Christian Church, that of the provincial governor Pliny, described Christians gathering before sunrise "singing a hymn to Christ as though to a god."

These statements seem unambiguous enough; what, then, were the problems that generated the struggle for precise definition? First, the claim that God *suffered* was problematic to many Christians. Second, it was difficult to translate the language of devotion into *teaching* about Christian belief. The poetic language of sermons or hymns can appear contradictory when an attempt is made to *explain*. Hymns characteristically pile one image on another without concern for the divergent meanings conveyed. Third, different audiences required different emphases. Against Roman polytheism, Christians affirmed monotheism. Against Jewish montheism, however, Christians insisted on the triadic nature of God. The Platonic description of the cosmos of being as flowing from its source by a ranked series of emanations provided an explanation that was attractive to many, but at the cost of picturing Christ as less than God. Using this image, Origen described God as the sun whose first ray was Christ.

Trinitarian descriptions were also intimately related to Christian experience. Christians agreed that Christ came as *logos* to reveal *knowledge* of God; if the redeemer is thought of as an enlightener, it is important to describe the content of that enlightenment. But Christ also brought *life*. The double focus on Christ as *knowledge* and as *life* made it necessary to describe how Christ affected both thought and experience.

Scripture did not help. There is no explicit doctrine of the trinity in the New Testament although references to God frequently take a three-fold pattern. But there are also passages that seem to be mutually contradictory – passages that emphasize Christ's adoption by God, usually at his baptism or resurrection; passages of identity in which Jesus Christ is identified simply as "Lord;" passages of distinction refer to two Lords, as when the Father talks to the Son. Finally, passages of derivation refer to the Father as "greater;" these passages imply that Jesus Christ came *from* God and thus must necessarily be *less than* God. So questions emerged: Was the divine that appeared on earth identical with the supreme divine who rules heaven and earth? Or should Christ be thought of as a demi-god? How is the divine in Christ related to the divine in the Father?

By the third century, different theological interests began to appear in the Greek East and the Latin West. The main trinitarian positions are discussed in the following sections.

Economic trinitarianism

Economic trinitarianism had two major representatives, Hippolytus (d. c.236), who was the last western author to write in Greek, and Tertullian (d. 225), the first western author to write in Latin. Tertullian, who first used the term "trinity," explained what he meant by the trinity: The Father is the sole source of deity, but God's unity is a philosophical, not a mathematical unity, the unity of one principle rather than one entity. Thus: "God's unity is subject to the disposition of the single godhead into Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in order to create and redeem."

> Now all the simple people – and they are always in the majority of believers – are dismayed by the idea of "economy." For the rule of faith brings them from the polytheism of the world at large to the one and only God, and they do not understand that while believing in the unity of God they must believe it together with his "economy." They assume that the plurality and distribution of the trinity implies a division of the unity: but the truth is that the unity in deriving the trinity from itself is not destroyed thereby but dispensed. And so they make a fuss about our preaching "two or three gods," and claim that they are worshippers of one God, not seeing that a unity reasonably distributed constitutes the truth. . . . "Monarchy" means simply the rule of one individual; but that monarchy, because it is the rule of one, does not preclude the monarch, who enjoys that rule, from having a son . . . or administrating his monarchy by agents of his own choosing. . . . Do you consider that the component parts of monarchy, its outward proofs, its instruments, and all that gives a monarchy its strength and prestige – do you consider these are destructive of it, as the rule of one? Of course not. I wish you would concern yourself with the *sense* and not with the *sound* of a word.
>
> (*Adversus Praxean* 3)

Tertullian's picture of the trinity was based on a temporal model in which differentiation occurred at different times and in different activities. The three-foldness of God's being was made explicit in creation and redemption: "God engendered the Word, using the Word to create the universe, and God's Wisdom to adorn or order it." He described the Spirit as "third from the Father and the Son, just as fruit derived from the shoot is third from the root."

A concept as abstract as that of the trinity necessarily depends heavily on the metaphors used to explain it. Tertullian used metaphors of root, tree, and fruit; river and fountain, sun and rays, and ruler and agents. These metaphors implied a hierarchical arrangement of the persons of the trinity. Hippolytus also argued against the assertion that the Father and Son are identical, for that would mean that the Father was born, suffered, and died. Hippolytus avoided this by saying that God's *power* is one, but differentiated according to God's activities. Both Tertullian and Hippolytus used another image that balanced their model of one God with several functions or activities. The Word or Son, Tertullian said, is a *person*, "a second in addition to the Father."

The idea of God as three "persons," however, should not assume twenty-first century ideas of "person." By "person," we usually refer to an integrated complex of mental, physical, and psychological functions. But the Latin word *persona* (Greek *prosopon*) means face, expression, role, or mask. The emphasis is on the external aspect of God, on God's

concrete presentation to human beings. For Tertullian the word "person" connoted a *distinction*, not a separation between individuals, as when the same actor, putting on a mask, plays a role; putting on another mask, she plays a different role. The one "person" has not been divided, but extended.

Tertullian used two other words that became important in later stages of the controversy, although Terullian himself did not place special emphasis on them. The Greek word *hypostasis* (Latin: *substantia*) is a biblical term. It indicated an external concrete object, an object in relation to other objects. (Hebrews I. 3 calls Christ the image of the Father's *hypostasis*.) The second term, *ousia*, is more abstract; it indicates an object whose individuality is revealed by an internal analysis. Originally, *hypostasis* and *ousia* were synonymous; they meant real being, existence, or essence. They were differentiated in the process of trinitarian debate.

Subordinationist trinitarianism

The second Trinitarian position explicitly subordinated the Son to the Father. Origen exemplified this position. He emphasized the distinctiveness of each aspect of the trinity, claiming that the Son is both *agenetos* (uncreated), participating directly in the substance of God's being, and *genetos* (created), in that he is not himself the source of that being. However, this formulation was either too confusing or too subtle to have the same influence as his practical instruction to pray *to* the Father, but *through* the Son: "We should not pray to any generate being, not even to Christ, but only to the God and Father of the universe, to whom our Savior himself prayed" (*De orat.* 15.1). He also said that "the Son is transcended by the Father in as great or greater a degree than that by which he himself and the Holy Spirit transcend the best of all other beings."

Origen's student, Dionysius of Alexandria, went beyond Origen's teaching to assert something close to tritheism, separating God into three powers, three separate hypostases – three divinities. Dionysius of Rome censured Dionysius of Alexandria, revealing the different concerns of Eastern and the Western theologians. To Western theologians, the divine *unity* was entirely clear, and important to protect. They found the distinctions between the persons of the trinity "mysterious," although they affirmed the reality of these distinctions. In the strongly platonic climate of the East, the instinct for locating the "rung," or distinctiveness of each entity was strong. These different interests confused the debate.

Monarchian trinitarianism

Monarchianism was based on the fear that God's unity was endangered by emphasis on God's threeness. There were two kinds of Monarchianism: Sabellianism (modalistic) and dynamic (or adoptionist) monarchianism.

In the early third century Sabellians taught that Father, Son, and Spirit are one and the same; they are *modes* or aspects of the same being, perhaps temporary and successive. The distinctions do not correspond to anything in the ultimate nature of God.

Sabellius (d. c.217) is reported to have said, "As there are 'diversities of gifts but the same spirit,' so also the Father is the same, but is expanded into the Son and the Spirit." (Ps. Athanasius, *Fourth Oration*: 25). Sabellius wanted to call God the "Sonfather."

Adoptionist (or dynamic) monarchianism taught that Christ was a human being on whom God's spirit descended in a unique way. Adoptionist monarchians quoted Psalm 2.7: "You are my Son, this day have I begotten you." Paul of Samosata (fl. third century) taught that the Incarnate Christ could be compared to the prophets on whom God's Word had also rested.

None of these positions were formally excluded by scripture or by third-century creeds. The old Roman Symbol, which later became the Apostle's Creed, read simply: "Do you believe in God the Father the Almighty?" And "Do you believe in Christ Jesus the Son of God?" By the end of the third century, the second phrase read (as today): "His only Son, our Lord." In short, creedal definition did not constrain theological speculation on the nature of the trinity. Rather, Trinitarian debates led to efforts to make creeds more precise.

Although third-century differences of perspective in the East and the West should not be exaggerated, Eastern theologians tended to understand the trinity as connected, mutually engaged yet *different* beings. Eastern theologians affirmed unity, but *described* differentiation. In the West, on the other hand, theologians emphasized unity, differentiating within the unity of God only roles or activities. These may appear to be two sides of the same coin, but a monistic view of God implies that *ultimately* the relationships within the source of reality are not *real*, but collapse into unity. Emphasis on the distinctiveness of the persons within the trinity implies that relationships, not simply qualities, are to be found at the level of ultimate reality. If God's essence is relationship, different but related entities are assumed.

Trinitarian conflict was not settled in the third century. It was to be the major issue at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Even then, the council was able to achieve resolution only for as long as Constantine lived to enforce the resolution.

READING

Tertullian, *Against Praxean*

3 Constructing Christian Churches

Church organization

Third-century Christian communities struggled to define themselves, a process that consisted of difficult and contested decisions about what could be included and what must be excluded. Christians attempted to integrate what they considered the best of their society's cultural and intellectual resources, and they excluded aspects they found incompatible with Christian faith. Sometimes identification *with*, and distancing *from*, occurred simultaneously. For example, Christians were eager to be seen as continuous with Judaism in order to benefit from the respect Jews enjoyed as an ancient and

honored religion. Yet they did not want to be confused with Jews; every Christian author wrote a treatise or a large section of a treatise against the Jews.

Christians' other-worldly orientation functioned as criticism of, and resistance to, "this world." But although Christians considered their beliefs and values to be counter-cultural, they also appropriated some of the values of the surrounding culture. For example, the social arrangements of Christian communities reflected rather than over-turned or challenged those of contemporary society. Male leadership in Christian churches, a debated issue in the first and second centuries, was firmly in place by the middle of the third century. On the other hand, Christians rejected their culture's belief in fate or determinism, insisting on human freedom and responsibility.

In deciding which aspects of Roman culture to include or exclude, Christians responded to particular social circumstances, not to abstract principles. Against popular belief in astrology, against Stoic theories of necessity, and against Gnostics, Christians emphasized the ability to *choose*. Irenaeus accused Gnostics of believing that "everything passes away by necessity into that state out of which it was created. And they even make God the slave of this necessity, so that even God cannot add immortality to that which is mortal" (*Adv. Haer*. II.14). Tertullian wrote: "God sets before human beings good and evil, life and death. The entire order of disciplines is arranged through precepts, as God calls, threatens, and exhorts. This could not be so if human beings were not free, endowed with a will, and capable of obedience and resistance" (*Adv. Marcion* 2.5.7).

Because of their insistence on humans' ability to choose, third-century Christians did not develop a doctrine of original sin. Irenaeus pictured the human race in solidarity with Adam's disobedience, but he insisted that this condition was already overcome by Christ's obedience. He wrote: "All people are of the same nature, able both to hold fast to what is good, and on the other hand, having also the power to cast it from them and not to do it" (*Adv. Haer*. IV.37).

Practical questions about the nature of the Church were related to understandings of human nature. Was the Church composed only of the "pure," or did it also include noticeably imperfect people? What was the Church's function in salvation? How should authority be organized and recognized? How should penitence be conducted? Conflicting points of view developed on each of these questions.

Prophecy

Supported by scriptural writings and Christian experience, the existence of ecstatic prophecy was undeniable. Yet a high respect for prophecy was at odds with the establishment of orderly communities. Prophecy was notoriously unpredictable and volatile, erratic both in the chosen prophet and in what was prophesied. Ignatius of Antioch, bishop, prophet, and martyr, was the first Christian author to assign legitimate prophecy to bishops. As a prophet and bishop himself, he testified to the ultimate authority, not of prophecy, but of the bishop:

> I cried out while I was with you, I spoke with a great voice, with God's own voice, "Give heed to the bishop and to the presbyters and deacons." . . . I had no knowledge of this from any human being, but the Spirit was preaching and saying this: "Do nothing without the bishop."
>
> (*Ad Philadelphians* 7.11)

Ignatius's claim that the Spirit insisted on vesting its authority in bishops came to be generally accepted. But the question was far from settled.

Montanus, founder of the Montanist movement, began to prophesy in Phrygia (Asia Minor) in about 172. Two women prophets traveled with him, Prisca and Maximilla. The first regional synods were called to deal with the claims of Montanism, but recordings of their decisions are not extant. Clearly these synods condemned the "new teachings," but Montanism spread across the Roman world. In North Africa, Tertullian became a convert to their teachings.

Prophecy is based on the belief that because the essence of the human person is spirit, other spirits can enter the body and speak though it. The metaphor frequently used to describe prophecy was that of a musician playing an instrument. Against leaders who sought to establish clear lines of institutional authority in Christian communities, Montanist groups argued for the volatile and unpredictable leadership of the Holy Spirit. The introduction to the *Actae of Perpetus and Felicity* (probably written by Tertullian, who developed Montanist sympathies in about 207), summarized Montanist contentions.

> The deeds recounted about the faith in ancient times were a proof of God's favor and achieved the spiritual strengthening of people as well; and they were set forth in writing precisely that honor might be rendered to God and comfort to people by the recollection of the past through the written word. Should not then more recent examples be set down that *contribute equally* to both ends? For indeed, these too will one day become ancient and needful for the ages to come, even though in our own day they may enjoy less prestige because of the prior claim of antiquity. Let those, then, who would restrict the power of the Holy Spirit to times and seasons look to this: the more recent events should be considered the greater, being later than those of old, and this a consequence of the extraordinary graces promised for the last stage of time. For in these last days, God declares, I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh and their sons and daughters shall prophesy and on my manservants and my maidservants I will pour my spirit and the young men will see visions and the old men shall dream dreams (Acts 2, 17–18). So too we hold in honor and acknowledge not only new prophecies, but new visions as well, according to the promise. And we consider all the other functions of the Holy Spirit as intended for the good of the church; for the same Spirit has been sent to distribute all his gifts to all, as the Lord apportions to everyone. (emphasis added)

Conflicts are evident in the passage. Against the view that the early days of Christianity were normative, the author claims that "last days" are even more instructive and authoritative than "the times of the apostles," or "ancient times." This contention supports his advocacy for the value of "new prophecies" and the continuing role of the Holy Spirit in the churches.

Should prophets be thought of as belonging to a past era? Or should ecstatic prophecy in the present be expected and valued? Both of these views were defended. The argument for on-going prophecy was supported by 88 New Testament references. Moreover, in Roman culture, oracles were highly respected, and a long tradition of ecstatic prophecy existed in Judaism. The second century *Didache*, a manual on church order, stipulated that prophecy should be respected if the prophet's behavior demonstrated Christian commitment. In short, Montanists felt themselves on firm ground when they claimed that prophecy should continue to be authoritative in the churches.

Cyprian (d. 258), bishop of Carthage, represented the culmination of a process by which prophecy came to be the prerogative of bishops. Cyprian had revelations that he recorded as oracles and circulated for everyone to read. He condemned Montanists, not for advocating prophecy, but because they did not agree that prophecy should be confined to bishops. "They have separated themselves from the church of God . . . where the elders preside," he said.

Authority

Conflict over the role of prophecy was part of a more general issue, namely, the establishment of formal authority in Christian congregations in which both formal and informal authority had formerly been tolerated. In the West, at the beginning of the third century, an experiment in distributing authority was initiated. The office of *seniores* was established. *Seniores* administered church property and monitored the conduct of clergy. The office disappeared in the third century as bishops gained authority and took over these functions.

It is not known exactly where or when the office of bishop originated. There is no mention of bishops in Jesus' teachings, but St Paul refers to bishops. The model for the Christian bishop may have been the Jewish patriarch who held lifelong, or even hereditary, authority. Tertullian claimed that the apostles had appointed bishops, and Cyprian assumed that the apostles *were* bishops. In North Africa, one of the few places for which evidence exists, lists of hundreds of third-century bishops are extant; every small town had a bishop.

The third-century *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* described the ideal of good Christian leadership. Bishops were to be men of blameless character, over fifty years of age, but if the church was small and all the members knew him, he could be younger than fifty. A bishop should be married to a Christian woman and not remarried (even if widowed). A bishop's children must be good Christians, and he must be meek, chaste, merciful, and adept at peace-making. He should be learned and lettered, but if not, he must at least know the scriptures well. Once appointed, the bishop could serve for the rest of his life.

The primary requirement, however, was that bishops must be men of keen discernment. Their duties demanded this quality, for they must investigate potential donors and refuse their support if they were unrepentant sinners. Problematic sources of church finances was one of the most frequently mentioned problems faced by third-century bishops. In addition, bishops must supervise the education of orphans, and discern false teachers and expel them. The apostles had told Christians not to go to secular courts with their disputes, and bishops were charged not only with making just decisions but also with reconciliation of the quarreling parties. Members who did not yield to their bishop's guidance must be excised from the congregation, at first for two to seven weeks; if after that time they were still unrepentant, they were to be excommunicated for life.

Bishops accumulated many other duties and powers, but the sobering bottom line was that at the Last Judgment a bishop was personally responsible for the members of his congregation. Augustine (d. 430), not otherwise a timid bishop, admitted that he trembled at the thought of that awesome responsibility.

Bishops' authority, and the power to assert that authority, was established during the second and third centuries. A bishops' power was institutional and judicial, but it was also spiritual, the authority to include or exclude individuals from Christ's body. Bishops imposed penalties ranging from temporary denial of admission to the Eucharist to excommunication, ejection from the community, and a curse (*anathama*). Bishops ruled "in the place of God," as one third-century text says. The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a third-century Syrian church order, instructs: "Love your bishop as a father; fear him as a king; honor him as God."

Abuses of power were not unknown. Origen, not himself a bishop, characterized (or perhaps caricatured), bishops as saying: "We terrify people, and make ourselves inaccessible, especially if they are poor. To people who come and ask us to do something for them, we behave as no tyrant, even, would. We are more savage to petitioners than any civil rulers are. [Origen concluded] You can see this happening in many recognized churches, especially in the bigger cities" (*In Matt.* 16.8).

Nevertheless, bishops' powers were not uncontested. The letters of Bishop Cyprian, written in the mid-third century from his place of hiding during the Decian persecution, reveal his struggle to maintain his authority over rebellious clergy, confessors who were usurping his authority by liberally granting absolution to Christians who had lapsed in persecution, and communities of celibate women. The latter is a particularly interesting moment in the development of ascetic communities of women. Having left fathers and refused husbands, these women thought they should be able to choose their own dress and the details of their lifestyle. They must have heard with some dismay Cyprian's words: "Obey your bishop as a father." Establishing his control over celibate women was apparently quite crucial to Cyprian's authority as a bishop, and he was ultimately successful in dictating the details of their dress and activities.

There were two checks on bishops' power. First, bishops were elected by the clergy with the consent – by acclamation – of the congregation. Second, once elected, bishops were in a high-risk position. Until the mid-third century no widespread systematic persecution of church members occurred; rather, bishops were consistently targeted. Although Cyprian hid and attempted to administer his church by letters during the first part of the Decian persecution, he was arrested and martyred by beheading when he returned to Carthage in 258.

Some of the most vexing problems relating to authority were generated by persecutions. As evident in the *Acts of Perpetua and Felicity*, the confessors – those who had confessed Christian faith and been condemned to death – enjoyed great personal power, prestige, and authority. Frequently, a persecution would cease as suddenly and unpredictably as it began leaving some confessors alive and well. These Christians were often more popular than the local bishop, many of whom had withdrawn into hiding during the persecution. Yet bishops held institutional power, so the two different kinds of power came into conflict.

The Decian persecution in the mid-third century left crowds of lapsed Christians eager to be reunited with the Church. Faced with thousands of penitents, the issue of their restitution became church-wide. Two Roman priests differed over how severe churches should be with Christians who had lapsed. Hippolytus (d. c.236) maintained the hard line that Christians who had lapsed could be readmitted to communion only on their deathbeds. Callixtus (d. c.222), a former slave who became bishop of Rome,

thought that people who had sinned in major ways should be reunited with the Church as soon as they had confessed and endured a period of exclusion. He quoted the parable of the wheat and the tares as the model for inclusion of the struggling and imperfect. He also cited Paul's question: "Who are you to judge another man's servant?" The mixture of animals in Noah's ark was also a precedent for a church of the imperfect. Callixtus argued that the holiness of any and all Christians was based, not on their sinlessness, but on God's forgiveness.

Schism and heresy

Christians' beliefs have usually been considered central to their religious loyalty. "Orthodoxy," or right belief increasingly defined Christian communities as councils pronounced on differing interpretations of scripture, theology, and practice and new members were required to recite and assent to creedal statements of belief. The word "heresy" comes from a Greek word simply meaning "choice," or something chosen, but Christians reshaped the word to indicate tenacious adherence to dissident doctrines or beliefs – "holding false opinions about God" – *as defined by bishops*. Not all disagreements pertained to doctrine, however. "Schism" refers to differences in matters of church order. Schismatics withdrew from established churches to organize separate communities and congregations. They held different opinions about matters of practice, "although they may believe just what we believe." In spite of the commonly accepted distinction between schism and heresy, Christian authors often polemically escalated accusations against opponents by calling schismatics "heretics."

Some bishops could see that heretical beliefs were actually useful to the Church. "Heresies" identified ideas and beliefs that needed clarification, or moral teachings that needed more precision. Bishops claimed that heretics and schismatics had become fascinated with a *part* of Christian faith, which they exaggerated in such a way as to distort traditional faith and practice. Montanists provide a good example.

In addition to their esteem for continuing prophecy, Montanists proposed a "new discipline," one that was sorely needed, Tertullian thought, in a time of moral laxity. They fasted Wednesdays and Fridays until sunset. They also held that no repentance could occur after baptism, that second marriages were not permitted, and that flight in the times of persecution was not allowed. Montanists also continued one of the earliest Christian interests, apocalypticism. They thought themselves to be living in "last days" in a church that had become more interested in "unity" than in moral rigor or prophetic utterance. Montanists believed that the Church should be thought of as the bride of Christ, "without spot or wrinkle," as a ship sailing through the storms of the world, and as a "holy society, living in righteousness."

By contrast, other Christians had largely lost interest in an imminent apocalypse. Their notions of purity had changed too. Origen's nostalgia for the astringent effect of imminent martyrdom was replaced by strategies for the long term. Clement responded to the variety of moral styles he saw about him in the Alexandrian Church by differentiating a "visible" and an "invisible" church. The visible church was defined objectively by a succession of bishops from the apostles, he said, but only the invisible church can claim to be "one." It is the invisible church that is the "body of Christ." The visible church

attempts – at best – to approximate the invisible, but the match between the ideal and the real is, and will always be, less than perfect. Clement's concept of the church accounted for the embarrassing imperfection in the visible church without relinquishing the *idea* of purity.

Two other issues appear in the records of third-century conflicts: sexual morality, and behavior in times of persecution (or the problem of the lapsed). In the 309 Synod of Elvira, 46 percent of the canons (rulings) had to do with control of sexuality. These dealt with questions concerning who could marry whom, and condemnations of adultery and incest. There were continuous debates throughout the third century about whether clergy should be celibate.

The establishment of formal penance was prompted by disagreements about readmission to communion of those who had lapsed in persecution. Standardization of penitential practices was attempted but not completed in the third century. Left to the discretion of individual communities, penance could be either too severe or too lax. Because adequate provision for securing forgiveness for sins committed after baptism was not in place, baptism was often postponed until a person was near death. Individuals were expected to atone for trivial sins by prayer, almsgiving, and mutual forgiveness. Larger sins, like theft or embezzlement, required a *public* penance consisting of confession and a period of exclusion from communion, followed by formal absolution and restitution. In the third century, Church leaders considered sins such as homicide, adultery, and idolatry/apostasy beyond the Church's authority to forgive. Gradually, however, they assumed the right to forgive these sins.

For third-century Christians the purity of the sacraments was largely an issue for the future. By tradition, baptism by water and in the name of the trinity was valid, and the sacrament was not seen as depending on the priest who dispensed it. But the question of which Christian communities could share communion emerged in Cyprian's church. Cyprian's response was to sacrifice rigorous notions of purity in order to insist on an objective standard for church membership. For him the criterion of membership was not the acceptance of certain beliefs, but *submission to the bishop*. From Cyprian came the startling and unprecedented statement, "The one who does not have the Church for mother cannot have God for father" (*The Unity of the Catholic Church*: 6).

Unity

The historical circumstances in which Cyprian spoke the above words help to explain his intransigence. In March 251, there was a schism in Carthage in which a rival bishop, Fortunatus, was elected. In 253, after the Decian persecution, another schism developed over the readmission to communion of those who had lapsed in the persecution. The Roman presbyter Novatian (martyred in 258) maintained Hippolytus's rigorist stance, insisting that lapsed Christians should be excommunicated until shortly before their death. In Carthage, Maximus was elected the Novatianist bishop. Cyprian's statement, "The one who does not have the Church for mother cannot have God for father" was written in an embattled situation.

Where was the "true Church?" Which of the rival bishops was authorized to speak for it? There were no doctrinal disputes among the contenders. Cyprian claimed his

authority as bishop on the basis of an alleged unbroken succession of bishops from the apostles. But questions remained. Should the Catholic Church admit to communion people who had been baptized in Christian groups considered heretical or schismatic? In 256 the African bishops sided with Cyprian's view that rebaptism was necessary for those who had been baptized in schismatic or heretical groups. However, Stephen, bishop of Rome, thought that rebaptism was unnecessary. The issue remained unsettled at the time of Stephen's martyrdom in 257, and Cyprian's in 258. The struggle itself, however, highlighted another issue that remained unsettled in the third century: Was episcopal authority to be collegial among bishops, or did the Roman bishop have primacy?

Cyprian's treatise *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* proposed several different bases for the unity of the Catholic Church. He claimed a historical unity based on a presumed unity at the beginning of Christianity. He also claimed a metaphysical unity, "one God, one Christ, one Church." And he claimed an existential unity, the Church as "one people fastened together in a solid bodily unity by the glue of concord." He pictured the Church as streams flowing from a single spring; as light emanating from a single source; as a fetus in the mother's womb ("Whoever leaves the womb cannot breathe apart."); as a coat that is "not cut or rent;" and as the unity of a single body. For Cyprian, however, the visible and objective symbol and reality of the Church's unity was vested in the person of the bishop: "The bishop is in the church, and the church is in the bishop, and if anyone is not with the bishop, he is not in the church." Even martyrdom, the ultimate test of Christian commitment, did not "count" if the martyr was not "with the bishop." Schismatic confessors existed, he said, but they "are not good men," despite appearances. He went so far as to compare them to Judas.

Cyprian acknowledged that heresy and schism were increasing; "with us the vigor of faith has withered." How was this to be explained? Because, he said, these are last days, when chaos and error must be expected. Apparently some schismatics had quoted scripture against him, for Cyprian argued *against* the verse, "Where two or three are gathered together, there I [Christ] am in the midst of them." Clearly, Cyprian argued for a unity that did not exist.

Readers of Cyprian's treatise can discern in the midst of his passionate plea for unity the pain of persecuted and embattled Christian communities. Cyprian's experience of personal and communal peril and the threat of dissolution is revealed in his treatise. His harsh language responded to the desperate circumstances in which he wrote.

READING

Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*

Women in second- and third-century Christian movements

Many women in the privileged classes of the Roman Empire, like Perpetua, were educated. Some – a few – were influential in their society and enjoyed freedom in public life. Literature of the period indicates that women achieved recognition as poets, writers,

and historians, and there is one reference to a woman engineer. Seneca wrote, "Women have the same inner force and the same capacity for nobleness as men." But Musonius commented, "Only a woman trained in philosophy is capable of being a good housewife." Until the fourth century, most women were under the legal guardianship (*potestas*) of a father, even when they married; a woman only became legally dependent on her husband when her father died.

The picture is complex. There was a trend, evident in laws concerning property, divorce, and inheritance, toward greater freedom for women. But there was also a reaction to women's increasing economic and social mobility. Popular writers often associated greater freedom for women with a breakdown in general moral standards. Curiously, the strongest statements in support of women's abilities and activities often appear in the same societies and at the same time as the strongest statements against women. Local differences further complicate the task of anyone who strives to understand women's situation in the later Empire. Generalizations based on laws, literary evidence, and church canons are inadvisable; the evidence, according to historian Gillian Clark, is irreducibly "geographically patchy, class-biased, and male-biased."

Societies and communities may agree about what the issues are, but they seldom agree about how they should be resolved. If, for example, we find strong statements about women, their dress, and their roles in Christian communities, we should not conclude that male leaders and authors, to a man, had no esteem for women. On the basis of the evidence, we can, however, recognize that male leaders considered it essential to their credibility as leaders to define and establish women's public and private roles. Apparently, Christians did not significantly alter their assumptions about women from those of their society. Activities permitted by law and custom to Roman women were similar to those allowed Christian women. In different geographical and temporal settings, Christianity both undermined and subverted *and* strengthened traditional attitudes toward women.

The Platonist Celsus, writing about 178, accused Christians of subverting social conventions. He cited Roman patterns of authority within the family by which the *paterfamilias* had the legal power of life and death over his wife, children, and slaves. What did Celsus see in Christian communities that prompted his criticism?

Part of the excitement of the early Christian movement was the possibility it held of restructuring family and social relationships. Jesus himself had shocked his disciples by treating women with attention and respect. Moreover, Paul's statement in Galatians 3.18, "In Christ there is neither male nor female," (from an early baptismal formula), authorized a new spiritual equality that seemed to imply social equality. Apocalyptic expectations also encouraged Christians to work hastily and effectively for the coming kingdom. In the earliest Christian movement, men and women worked together, traveled together, and in some cases, lived together in order to facilitate missionary activity. Men and women who were vowed to celibacy experimented with "spiritual marriage" (*subintroductae*, or *agapatae*), for mutual companionship, protection, and support.

By the beginning of the second century, churches repeatedly outlawed spiritual marriages, apparently finding them an insupportable strain on the commitment of the participants, the credulity of the community, or both. Church legislation continued to prohibit these relationships; 24 synods condemned them in the third and fourth centuries, suggesting that spiritual marriage still attracted adherents. Spiritual marriages

demonstrate the struggle of women and men to find new relationships that would support and strengthen cooperative work.

In the second century, women sometimes occupied official ministry positions in churches. They were called "deaconesses," or "widows." Women's ministries focused on assistance of the sick, care for orphans, strangers, prisoners, and assisting at the baptism of women, though male clergy were required to say the words of baptism. Women who held ministry roles were invariably women who were not sexually active at the time. Yet married priests were told not to sleep with their wives only at the beginning of the fourth century, and until the end of the fourth century no enforcement of clerical celibacy was attempted.

A prayer of ordination for deaconesses is recorded in the fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions*, which claims to be a compilation of earlier documents. In this prayer, God's authorization and protection of Jewish women is cited as precedent for Christian women's ministries.

> O eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the creator of man and woman, who replenished with the spirit Miriam and Deborah and Hulda and Anna; who did not disdain that thy only-begotten child should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony and in the temple, did ordain women to be keepers of thy holy gates; do thou now also look down upon this thy servant that is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her thy holy spirit, that she may worthily discharge the work that is committed to her to thy glory, and the praise of thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to Thee and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

Women regularly appeared in leadership roles in heterodox communities. Gnostic communities had prophetesses who held both authority and sacramental functions. Since women have usually been associated with body (and men with rationality) in the West, it is striking that Gnostics combined ultimate rejection of body with acceptance of women's ministries. The second-century Gnostic "Gospel of Mary" described a conflict among the disciples over Mary Magdalene's teaching role. Before his ascension, Christ taught his disciples, but after his ascension, they found that they were not very clear about what he meant on some matters, so Mary Magdalene undertook to clarify Jesus' meaning by revealing to them some private revelations he had made to her. Peter was outraged at her presumption: "Did he then speak with a woman in preference to us, and not openly? Are we to turn back and all listen to her? Did he not prefer us to her?" Levi tried to mollify Peter, saying that the disciples should not miss the opportunity to hear Jesus' secret teaching from Mary.

In the second century, however, there were few clear lines between heterodox and orthodox communities. A growing consensus that Jesus Christ came to earth in the flesh differentiated incarnationist Christians from Gnostic Christians, but outsiders often overlooked doctrinal differences. The association of women in leadership roles with communities labeled "heretical" meant that one obvious way for incarnationist Christians to differentiate themselves from rival groups was to proscribe leadership by women. Before his conversion to Montanism Tertullian wrote, "And the women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures, maybe even to baptize!" By the mid-third century, the mainstream view was – in Origen's words – "For it is improper for a woman to speak

in an assembly, no matter what she says, even if she says admirable things, or even saintly things, that is of little consequence, since they come from the mouth of a woman."

Feminine imagery for God was used at the same time that women were excluded from leadership roles in the churches. Clement of Alexandria wrote, "And God himself is love. . . . In his ineffable essence he is father; in his compassion to us he became mother. The father by loving became feminine." Clement, like Tertullian, used "bad mother – good mother" language to introduce his description of the atonement. Eve, the virgin, introduced sin into the world, while Mary, the virgin, introduced the Word of God: "What had gone to destruction through the female sex was by the same sex restored to salvation." This parallelism, however, did not result in esteem for actual women, who were rebuked in strong and sarcastic terms for their desire to participate in Christian ministry. Referring to I Corinthians 14.35 Tertullian remarked sarcastically, "How very likely that he who consistently refused to allow a woman even to learn should have granted a female authority to teach" (*De baptismo* 17). He insisted, "A woman may not speak nor baptize, or offer the Eucharist, nor claim the right to any masculine function, still less to the priestly office" (*De virginibus velandis* 9).

The first Christian images

The earliest extant material evidence of the Christian movements comes from the third century. This evidence has often been overlooked, yet the first Christian buildings, images, and sculpture significantly augment our knowledge of Christians' interests and values. Fragments of Christian meeting-houses have been discovered, all of which were built after 235 and before 400. The oldest extant Christian house was at Dura Europus, near the eastern border of the Roman Empire in the Syrian dessert. The Christian meeting house, a temple of Mithras, and the Jewish house synagogue were on the same street. Ironically, these buildings were preserved because the town was destroyed in the mid-third century. These houses, built against a wall, were buried in the heavy reinforcements needed for an imminent war with Persia. The synagogue and the Christian house are indistinguishable in construction from the houses surrounding them. All had wall paintings, done by several artists, none of whom were especially proficient. Figures are stiff, but subjects seem to have been carefully chosen. The Christian house contained depictions of Adam and Eve, Christ the Good Shepherd bearing a lamb, the healing of the paralytic, Peter walking on water, the three Marys at the tomb, David and Goliath, and the Samaritan woman drawing water.

Fragments of *tituli*, or house churches, are also extant in Rome, Spain, and Britain. But by the second- or early third-century, the basilica design was being adapted by both Jews and Christians for worship. Used in Rome and elsewhere in the Empire since the second century BCE, the basilica is a rectangular hall whose breadth is between a half and a third of the length.

Catacombs

In addition to worship locations, Christians also needed burial sites. Christians rejected the common Roman practice of cremation, though they gave no (written) reasons for

this preference. Perhaps burial was attractive to Christians because, according to scripture, Jesus had been buried in a rock-cut sepulcher. Their secular neighbors thought it remarkable that Christians buried not only their family members, relatives, and members of their communities, but also many of the urban poor who would otherwise have been buried *en masse* in huge pits for promiscuous burial.

Until about the mid-second century, Christians had no private cemeteries; like their neighbors, they used the underground excavations called catacombs. After about 150, long series of Christian catacombs were dug in the relatively soft volcanic rock, or *tufa*. The Roman catacombs were built about two miles outside Rome, obeying the prohibition against burying the dead in the city.

"There at the tomb of Polycarp," one early text reads, "the Lord will permit us as shall be possible to us to assemble ourselves together in joy and gladness to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, alike in memory of them that have fought before, and for the training and preparation of those who will fight hereafter." Christians visited the catacombs to commemorate the dead, both kin and local martyrs, but they did not habitually worship in the catacombs. The early catacombs have few rooms of any size; the largest could have held about 50 people, packed in. It would also have been impractical to walk back and forth from the city for regular worship. Moreover, there is no evidence that Christians hid in the catacombs in times of persecution, for the location of Christian catacombs was known to everyone.

Christians frequented the catacombs for occasional communal gatherings, but also for private devotions. According to the fourth century Christian, Jerome, Christians often strolled and prayed in the catacombs. He described the ambiance and effect of the catacombs.

> When I was a boy in Rome, and was being educated in liberal studies, I was accustomed, with others of like mind and age, to visit on Sundays the sepulchers of the apostles and martyrs. And often did I enter the crypts, dug deep in the earth, with their walls on either side lined with the bodies of the dead, where everything is so dark that it almost seems as if the Psalmist's words were fulfilled, "Let them go down alive into hell." Here and there the light, not entering through windows but filtering down from above through shafts, relieves the horror of the darkness. But again, as one cautiously moves forward, the black night closes round.
>
> (*Commentary on Ezekiel* 60)

The presence of death is well-known to "concentrate the mind," and to intensify and focus consciousness. Jerome described how inspired his prayers were in this environment. Scenes painted on the ceilings and walls presented scriptural stories of miraculous deliverance, mostly from the Hebrew Bible (figure 1.1, see CD Rom figures 1.1 and 1.2). A third-century collection of prayers from North Africa cites most of the same scriptural incidents that are pictured on catacomb walls. Catacomb paintings may have served as memory aids for reciting certain prayers.

Paintings are not unique to the Christian catacombs, and much of the painting in Christian catacombs had little to do with Christianity, but used a repertoire of images common to Jewish, secular, and Christian tombs (see CD Rom figure 1.3). Flowers and foliage, naked *putti* harvesting grapes, Orpheus playing his lyre, and Cupid and Psyche gathering flowers are common subjects. Similarly, inscriptions owe more to a common

Figure 1.1 Three Hebrew Children in the Fiery Furnace, Catacomb of Priscilla, third century. Daniel's three friends are depicted as *orantes* in the midst of flames. They represent peaceful and trusting *pietas* in the midst of overpowering threat.
Orantes were common in classical painting, sculptural art, and coins before Christians adopted the representation. Usually a female figure with upraised arms, the figure represented prayerful piety and supplication. No figure appears more frequently in catacomb art. Photo AKG/Erich Lessing.

repertoire than to Christianity. Jewish and Christian inscriptions are often indistinguishable: *In pace*, or "in peace thy sleep." Catacomb art provides another reminder that Christians, Jews, adherents to Roman religions, and others shared a broad secular repertoire of ideas and images.

Human figures were the primary subjects of catacomb art. *Orantes*, figures with arms lifted in prayer, had a long pre-Christian history in Roman art. They were often representations of the deceased (see CD Rom figures 1.4 and 1.5). The style of catacomb art was surprisingly standard across the Roman Empire. It is striking that at the same time that martyrs' blood was flowing, Christian art expressed only deliverance and peace. Apparently Christians sought images that compensated rather than reflected their experience. Bodies are expressive; the bodies of dozens of *orantes* figures found in the catacombs strain to enter their prayer, as described by the early third-century Clement of Alexandria.

> For this reason also we raise the head and lift the hands in the closing outburst of prayer, following the eager flight of the spirit into the spiritual world, And while we thus endeavor to detach the body from the earth by lifting it upwards along with spoken words, we spurn

Figure 1.2 Banquet, Catacomb of Priscilla, Capella Greca, eighteenth century.
Banquets were depicted often in the second- and third-century catacombs. Here seven people recline on a couch in preparation for eating a meal of bread, fish, and wine. There is some ambiguity about the gender of the figures. Amusingly, the eighteenth-century chapel above the catacomb repeats the fresco in mosaic *tesserae* – with one correction. The figure at the left of the group, the main celebrant, has been given a beard, although the ankle-length skirt characteristic of women's dress has been retained. Photo SCALA, Florence.

> the *fetters* of the flesh and constrain the soul, winged with desire of better things, to ascend into the holy place.
>
> (*Stromateis* 7.7.40; emphasis added)

Depictions of banquets were common in catacomb painting. Three overlapping interpretations have been proposed for these scenes. They might represent the customary family meal (*refrigerium*) at the tomb of a loved one on the anniversary of their death, a eucharistic celebration, a heavenly banquet, or all of the above (figure 1.2; see CD Rom figure 1.6).

In about 120 catacomb images Christ is shown as a shepherd, bearded or unbearded, carrying a sheep. A small marble sculpture from the third quarter of the third century shows Christ as Good Shepherd (see CD Rom figure 1.7). Christ was also occasionally depicted as a philosopher teaching his disciples.

Scenes from the Hebrew Bible dominate catacomb painting and other art (see CD Rom figure 1.8). The most frequent subjects were Noah and the ark, Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, Moses striking the rock (see CD Rom figures 1.1 and 1.2), and Jonah's encounter with the "great fish" (see CD Rom figure 1.9). Daniel in the den of lions and the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace occur several times (Figure 1.1; see CD Rom

figure 1.10). Adam and Eve, coyly covering their genitals, appear at the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus (see CD Rom figure 1.11).

Less frequently, there are New Testament scenes, such as the arrival of the Magi, Christ and the Samaritan woman, the annunciation of the angel to Mary, the baptism of Jesus, and various miracles, the most common of which is the resurrection of Lazarus. And there are symbols like loaves and fishes (see CD Rom figure 1.12). The catacomb of Callixtus has two baptism scenes in which the baptized are smaller than the baptizer, indicating that they are *infans* or *neonates*, newly born Christians. They are also naked, as later baptismal instructions direct.

Who painted these scenes? Historians' best guess is that it was the *fossores* or diggers who excavated the catacombs. Several roughly contemporary church orders mention the *fossor* as a minor clerical grade, but nothing further is known about them. (see CD Rom figure 1.13)

What was *missing* from the earliest Christian images? There was no naturalistic portrait of Christ (see CD Rom figure 1.14), and no depiction of the crucifixion until 432. Constantine outlawed crucifixion in the first quarter of the fourth century, but it was not used as a Christian symbol until associations of a dishonorable and gruesome death faded from living memory. Christians preferred to concentrate on themes of life and deliverance rather than on Christ's death or the deaths of more contemporary martyrs.

Much more imagery from pre-Constantinian Christianity has been lost than is extant. Some images are still faintly visible, but are impossible to decipher. Until the nineteenth century, exploration of the catacombs was not done in a scientific manner, and from the early medieval period forward, graves were repeatedly ransacked. There were also attempts to remove frescoes that damaged or destroyed them.

In addition to catacomb images, all existing fragmentary house churches show evidence of painting. The common misinterpretation of early Christianity as imageless and antagonistic to images cannot be sustained. Christians of the second and third centuries apparently needed images that sustained them in persecution, accompanied their worship, and offered alternatives to secular images that often featured popular gladiators, and the images of competing Roman religions.

Liturgy

Christian liturgies reveal Christians' insistence on the engagement of bodies and senses in the worship of the incarnated God. Second and third century texts and visual images indicate that attention was given to forming Christian bodies as well as Christian souls. We must not, however, attempt to identify a "Christian attitude" toward bodies, for a wide range of attitudes, ideas, and images existed. Bodies, sexuality, and gender assumptions lay at the heart of the experience of the Word made flesh, and thus were frequently the subject of conflicts in Christian communities.

Before theologies were articulated, people *practiced* Christianity. Complete liturgical manuscripts are not extant until the eighth century, but bits of information, suggestions, and hints found in letters, sermons, and legislation from early councils and synods can be pieced together to sketch second-century liturgical practices. We cannot, however, assume that everything mentioned was actually practiced in Christian

communities. These sources are also difficult to interpret since they may have been prescriptive rather than descriptive. Moreover, liturgies were in constant use, so they were constantly altered, revised, and added to. Like contemporary Italian cathedrals, they contain strata in which the earliest construction is overlaid with many later additions. Local variations also make it impossible to generalize across the Roman Empire.

Christians received few instructions from their founder about how to worship or how to teach converts. This meant that they had considerable latitude for shaping their worship. Christian worship seems to have moved from showing great differences across geographical locations to gradual consensus and standardization. Standardized liturgical practice was the result of concerted efforts by Christian leaders, and occurred slowly.

Second-century Christian worship

The earliest evidence for the worship of Christian communities comes from hearsay. Pliny, a Roman governor, reported his impression of Christians to the emperor Trajan: "The sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this, they met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god. . . ." The music of the earliest Christian communities is lost, but from the first century forward, the words of hymns are extant. Some liturgical historians have posited a Jewish origin for Christian singing, but, though this is a likely conjecture, no documentary evidence supports this claim.

Justin Martyr gave the first substantial description of Christian worship. Writing his *First Apology* from Rome in about 150, he described a regular weekly service.

> On the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. . . . When we have finished the prayers, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen. The distribution and reception of the consecrated [elements] takes place, and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. Those who prosper, and who so wish, contribute, each one as much as he chooses to. What is collected is deposited with the president, and he takes care of orphans and widows, and those who are in want on account of sickness or any other cause, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers who are sojourners among us, and briefly, he is the protector of all those in need.
> (*Apology* 67)

In 100, Christianity was still largely an urban phenomenon in the West. In the East, however, it had spread to small towns and villages. Christian communities were loosely organized with volunteer administrators and little connection with one another. There were overseers (*episcopoi*), stewards (*diakonai*), and migrating preachers, like St Paul. Ritual was also loosely organized. Some congregations assembled at sunrise for prayer and hymn singing, and toward evening for a meal (*agape*).

Christians preached in town squares, competing with Stoic and Platonist preachers for the crowd. Sometimes Christians hired a hall, as the Ephesus congregation did when

St Paul visited. But most Christians met in private homes, a practice they called "breaking the bread from house to house." The first meeting rooms were dining rooms, since a meal was the core of the service and in Roman homes the dining room was often the only large room. It was usually on the top floor, hence the "upper room, high up, open to the light," mentioned in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Christians met to sing and pray, to teach, to baptize new members, and to eat together. One of the earliest liturgical prayers says simply, "God, we thank you for the knowledge, faith, and immortality you have made known through your servant Jesus." Second-century liturgical prayers described the salvation Christians experienced as revelation and as forgiveness, as life and as light. They seem to have been unconcerned with more precise definitions, an attitude noticed by their neighbors. Celsus, a second-century secular critic of Christianity wrote, "Some will not hear or give reason about their faith, but stick to 'ask no questions but believe,' and 'your faith will save you,' and 'the wisdom of the world is a bad thing and foolishness is good.' "

Creeds, or statements of Christian belief, emerged from baptismal liturgies. There were many variations in different locations in the second century, but there were also several common factors. All creeds invoked the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," and they all mentioned the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The earliest creeds stated the facts Christians believed without analysis or explanation. How Christians should *act* (*orthopraxy)* was apparently more important than how they should articulate their beliefs.

The earliest descriptions of preparation for baptism are found in fourth-century catechetical instructions. Several meanings are given for baptism. Baptism meant entrance into the Christian community and participation in the hope of everlasting life. Writing in about 155, Justin called baptism "illumination." Sometimes St Paul's strong interpretation of baptism as participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus is cited. Birth imagery is also evident in baptismal rites that described the newly baptized as "neonates," newborns. The gospel account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet (John 13. 1–20), together with references to foot-washing in several later baptismal rites suggests that foot-washing may have been *the* baptismal rite in some Christian communities. The process of becoming a Christian was thought of and expressed in diverse ways.

The eucharistic celebration consisted of a meal, called a "love feast" (*agape*). The name invited conjectures and allegations from unsympathetic neighbors on the nature of this love feast. Joseph Jungmann, a twentieth-century scholar of ancient liturgies, has said that that the greatest change in the history of Christian worship was abandoning the meal in the mid-fourth century when congregations became too large to make a meal feasible.

The *Didache*, or *Teaching*, a Syrian church manual (date unknown) includes several eucharistic prayers. They strongly resemble Jewish blessings that accompanied the third cup of the paschal meal, and there is no mention in them of the body and blood of Christ. The blessing for the cup reads, "We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your child, which you have revealed through Jesus, your child. To you be glory forever." The blessing for the bread: "As this piece of bread was scattered over the hills and then was brought together and made one, so let your church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever."

The Greek word *eucharistia* means thanksgiving; this was the primary meaning of the celebration. At the beginning of the second century, Clement of Rome argued against the idea that the eucharist is an offering, though other sources refer to "offering the gift." Clement of Alexandria wrote, "Rightly do we not offer God who has need of nothing a gift. On the contrary, we glorify him who dedicated himself to us, by dedicating ourselves to him."

Yet the Roman liturgy of about 150 included the following eucharistic prayer.

> We therefore offer unto thee this cup for the refreshing of our souls, and this cup of everlasting salvation, making remembrance of his death and resurrection, and giving thanks unto thee. And we beseech thee to send thy holy spirit upon this oblation, and upon thy church, that he may fill us and unite us in thy kingdom. To thee be praise and honor and worship through Jesus Christ thy son, with the Holy Spirit in holy church unto the ages of ages.

Finally, Christian literature exhibits a remarkable lack of fanaticism. The earliest church manual, the *Didache*, recognized a tension between the assumption that Christians are holy people and loving acceptance of actual Christians: "If any person is holy, let him come; if any person is not, let him repent. . . . If you can bear the Lord's full yoke, you will be perfect. But if you cannot, then do what you can."

By the beginning of the fourth century, Christians had achieved informal consensus about the reality of Jesus Christ's incarnation. They had begun to construct creeds that shared common elements. Bishops had gained institutional and spiritual power and authority. But central doctrinal issues were unresolved, and although most Christians did not realize it, persecution was not over. Chapter 2 explores fourth-century Christians' volatile and contradictory excitements.

READINGS

The Didache
Clement's First Letter
The Epistle to Diognetus