



Lambs into Lions: Explaining Early Christian Intolerance

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LAMBS INTO LIONS: EXPLAINING EARLY CHRISTIAN INTOLERANCE*

In the fourth century A.D., relations between Christianity and that congeries of traditional Mediterranean religions that we now label “paganism” underwent a dramatic change.¹ The century began with a systematic effort to stamp out the upstart faith as a threat to established values. By its end, roving bands of Christian vigilantes, supported at the highest levels of imperial government, destroyed temples and assaulted with virtual impunity believers in the old gods. Shortly after would follow two events of very different character and historic magnitude, but together indicative of a new order. In Alexandria, the celebrated female philosopher Hypatia would be savagely beaten to death by a frenzied mob egged on by their bishop, Cyril, while some twelve hundred miles to the west another bishop, Augustine of Hippo, found theoretical justification for coercion in the parable of the dinner party (Luke 14:16-24), in which the host reacts to reluctant guests with the order, “Bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind . . . Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in”. For shock-value, then and now, the murder of Hypatia is unquestionably the more effective illustration of a changed world. But it is Augustine’s quieter assault that is of greater significance here. For in providing the proof text for

* Work on this topic began during the tenure of a Fellowship at the Annenberg Research Institute, Philadelphia in 1991-2. Earlier versions of this article were presented at Oregon State University in 1992, at Macquarie University in 1993 and at the University of Southern California in 1995. The list of colleagues to whom I am indebted for advice and criticisms has grown quite long, but some — Jack Talbott, Jeffrey Russell, Peter Brown and Naphtali Lewis — I can only begin to repay by absolving of any responsibility for the article’s remaining errors.

¹ Scholars have searched — so far unsuccessfully — for a term as convenient as “pagan” without its pejorative connotations. Garth Fowden proposes “polytheism” as a more neutral alternative; G. Fowden, “Constantine’s Porphyry Column: The Earliest Literary Allusion”, *Jl Roman Studies*, lxxxi (1991), p. 119 n. 1. Careless use of this term, however, would merely reinforce an already lamentable tendency in modern readers to presume that only Christians were monotheists, thereby distorting the fourth-century landscape as significantly as the term “pagan” now does. For a thoughtful definition of “pagans” as “people of the place” (that is, followers of traditional customs), see P. Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, trans. B. A. Archer (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), ch. 1.

a subsequent millennium of Christian intolerance, Augustine's reading seems to confirm a long-standing scholarly tradition that sees intolerance as a natural by-product of Christian belief, and consequently the ultimate cause of such events as Hypatia's murder.² The purpose of this article is to call that comfortable explanation into question.

Recent decades have seen a burst of new scholarship on virtually all aspects of Christian expansion in the fourth century, from the use of controlled violence on the local level to the new ceremonies developed to define church and state in imperial capitals. New methodologies have been put to particularly good use to understand the greatly enhanced resources of the Christian bishop in the post-Constantinian era.³ But this new scholarship continues to follow a conceptual scheme that is at least two hundred years old, according to which this coercion was a natural

² For a recent and readable summary of these events, see Chuvin, *Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, chs. 4-6. Augustine uses the parable in his *Epistula*, xciii (to Vincentius) (*S. Aurelii Augustini Hipponiensis episcopi epistulae*, ed. A. Goldbacher, 4 vols., Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum [hereafter C.S.E.L.], xxxiv, xlv, lviii, lvi, Vienna and Leipzig, 1895-1923, i, pp. 449-50; *Augustine: Letters*, trans. Sister W. Parsons, 5 vols., Fathers of the Church, xii, xviii, xx, xxx, xxxii, New York, 1951-6, ii, pp. 60-1), and again in *Sermo*, cxii (lxii) (*Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols., Paris, 1844-64, xxxviii, cols. 647-8; trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st ser., ed. P. Schaff, 14 vols., repr. New York, 1898-1907, vi, p. 449). Hypatia's murder is described by the fifth-century church historian Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, vii.15: *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 161 vols. (Paris, 1857-66), lxxvii, cols. 768-9; trans. A. C. Zenos, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd ser., ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, 14 vols. (New York, 1890-1900), ii, p. 160. See further J. Rist, "Hypatia", *Phoenix*, xix (1965), pp. 221-5; M. Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, trans. F. Lyra (Cambridge, Mass., 1995). For monotheistic intolerance, see A. Momigliano, "The Disadvantages of Monotheism for a Universal State", *Classical Philology*, lxxxi (1986), pp. 285-97.

³ See, for example, Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of a Christian Discourse* (Berkeley, 1991); P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, 1992). The revisionist implications of these studies are clearly evident in N. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley, 1994). On the role of the bishop in the fourth century, see also H. Chadwick, *The Role of the Christian Bishop in Ancient Society*, ed. E. C. Hobbs and W. Wuellner (Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, Berkeley, Protocol of the Thirty-Fifth Colloquy, 25 February 1979, Berkeley, 1980); G. Bowersock, "From Emperor to Bishop: The Self-Conscious Transformation of Political Power in the Fourth Century A.D.", *Classical Philology*, lxxxi (1986), pp. 298-307; G. Fowden, "Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire, A.D. 320-435", *Jl Theol. Studies*, 2nd ser., xxix (1978), pp. 53-78. The importance of the Christian sermon was suggested by R. MacMullen, "A Note on *Sermo Humilis*", *Jl Theol. Studies*, xvii (1966), pp. 108-12; see also R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984), p. 64-5.

outgrowth of monotheistic intolerance of alternative forms of worship. In this view, just as intolerance initially sustained the faithful during centuries of trial, so intolerance drove them, once they had achieved recognition under Constantine the Great, to insist with equal zeal on the suppression of all variant forms of belief. Coercion was thus the logical outcome of Constantine's conversion, reportedly as the result of a vision just before battle in 312, the effect of which was to open the coffers of imperial largesse to Christianity on an unprecedented scale.⁴

While there is obviously some truth in the proposition that intolerance follows from the rejection of other gods that lies at the core of monotheistic belief, this trait alone cannot explain why individuals other than Christians persecute, nor does it account for the presence of important voices for moderation in the early Christian community. Intolerance — that is, the active use of the coercive powers of the state to compel conformity to a given set of beliefs — is a phenomenon that extends far beyond the particular problem of Christian-pagan relations in antiquity, or the normal boundaries of religious and theological enquiry. It is a form of behaviour that may be found in every human group and organization. In every organization there are those inclined to favour repression and coercion, as a means to promote their views, over other methods of social interaction. What conditions allow such oppressors to prevail? By confining their search for the cause of Christian coercion to traits exclusive to that faith, scholars have limited their ability to answer this crucial question.

⁴ An important contemporary source for Constantine's relations with the church is the essay *De vita Constantini*, published shortly after the emperor's death by Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea. For the vision story, see *De vita Constantini*, i.28-9: Eusebius *Werke*, i, pt 1: *Über des Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, ed. F. Winkermann, 2nd edn (Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller [hereafter G.C.S.], vii, Berlin, 1991), pp. 29-30; trans. E. C. Richardson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., ed. Schaff and Wace, i, p. 490. Studies of Constantine and Christianity are legion. An excellent starting-point remains Norman Baynes's magisterial Raleigh Lecture to the British Academy in 1930: N. H. Baynes, "Constantine the Great and the Christian Church", *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, xv (1929), pp. 341-442; the lecture was also published separately in 1930 and reissued with new introduction and bibliography by Henry Chadwick in 1972. For a valuable study of Constantine's own writings, see H. Dörries, *Das Selbstzeugnis Kaiser Konstantins* (Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, philologisch-historische Klasse, 3rd ser., xxxiv, Göttingen, 1954). The following are the most important recent studies: T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians: Religion and the Religious Life from the Second to the Fourth Century A.D.* (New York, 1982); A. Wardman, *Religion and Statecraft among the Romans* (London, 1982); J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford, 1979).

Even as a Christian explanation, the standard view leaves unresolved a central paradox: how can it be that a religion whose foundation texts include the injunction to love one's enemies and "turn the other cheek", whose central figure relied on the pastoral imagery of the shepherd and his flock, and who himself became characterized as a sacrificial lamb — how can it be that such a religion was also inherently disposed to accept coercion as a means to implement its goals? How did lambs become lions? The standard explanation of this transformation depends on three very questionable premisses: first, that early Christianity was monolithic; secondly, that intolerant behaviour was normative for Christians; and thirdly, that paganism was the first and greatest object of that intolerance. The cumulative effect of these errors has been to encourage scholars to define pagans and Christians on the basis of mutual hostility and irreconcilable differences, and thereby to underestimate the significance of long periods during the first three centuries in which the two groups conducted a fruitful dialogue in an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence.⁵

Each of these premisses will be challenged in the following pages, in the course of which I will attempt to show that Christian use of coercion in the fourth century followed from a set of conditions that are political rather than theological in nature. If there is an internal reason for its use, it lies not in a clear set of imperatives whose consequences can be logically predicted, but in the opposite, a central ambiguity with regard to the use of force that eventually allowed those Christians who favoured coercion, Christians who will hereafter be referred to as "militants", to prevail. This ambiguity is not a trait unique to Christianity. It may be found in any number of organizations of the type to which Christianity clearly belongs, the broadly based mass movement. Therefore, I will argue that the answer to the question of Christian coercion lies in a dynamic that, under certain conditions, allows militants to take control of such movements.

What follows is offered only as a sketch, intended to suggest one or two ways in which, by identifying conditions in the fourth century that allowed Christian militants to prevail over others who favoured a more gradual and peaceful means of achieving their goals, it may be possible to further our understanding of

⁵ Cf. J. North, "The Development of Religious Pluralism", in T. Rajak, J. North and J. Lieu (eds.), *The Jews in the Religious Life of the Roman World* (London, 1992), pp. 174-85. See also nn. 23-4 below.

the way, in various ages, such people gain control over their communities.

I

PAGAN INTOLERANCE

The classic expression of the view that intolerance explains Christian success occurs in the work of Edward Gibbon, who named “the intolerant zeal of the Christians” first among the five characteristics that he claimed it his “melancholy duty” to relate.⁶ Influential as Gibbon’s Enlightenment equation of Christianity with intolerance has been, however, it is if anything surpassed by his corresponding picture of a benign and tolerant paganism that fell victim to the rise of “barbarism and religion”. This is a contrast that pervades the *Decline and Fall*, providing Gibbon with some of his most delicious rhetoric. “The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world”, he writes, “were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosophers as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful”.⁷ With such deft strokes, Gibbon enters into a conspiracy with his readers: unlike the credulous masses, he and we are cosmopolitans who know the uses of religion as an instrument of social control.⁸ So doing, Gibbon skirts a serious problem: for three centuries prior to Constantine, the tolerant pagans who people the *Decline and Fall* were the authors of several major persecutions, in which Christians were the victims. Gibbon covered this embarrassing hole in his argument with an elegant demur. Rather than deny the obvious, he adroitly masked the question by transforming his Roman magistrates into models of Enlightenment rulers — reluctant persecutors, too sophisticated to be themselves religious zealots but, rather, thwarted by Christian intransigence. The “princes and magistrates of ancient Rome”, he tells us, “were

⁶ In the famous fifteenth chapter of his *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon studiously excluded divine will as a factor, to the consternation of the Established clergy. His other causes were: (2) “the doctrine of a future life”; (3) “the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church”; (4) “the pure and austere morals of the Christians”; and (5) “the union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman empire”: E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, 7 vols. (London, 1909-14), ii, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, i, p. 31 (ch. 2). Gibbon’s inflammatory explanation of the fall of Rome occurs in his concluding chapter: *ibid.*, vii, p. 320 (ch. 71).

⁸ On Gibbon’s skill at using humour to win his readers’ confidence, see John Clive, “Gibbon’s Humour”, *Daedalus*, cv, no. 3 (1976), pp. 27-36.

strangers to those principles which inspired and authorized the inflexible obstinacy of the Christians in the cause of truth". He continues: "As they were actuated, not by the furious zeal of bigots, but by the temperate policy of legislators, contempt must often have relaxed, and humanity must frequently have suspended, the execution of those laws which they enacted against the humble and obscure followers of Christ".⁹

With such judgements, Gibbon was able to imply that the blame for such persecutions as did take place rested with none other than the Christians themselves. It is difficult to overestimate the influence of Gibbon's interpretation on subsequent scholarship. In a classic essay, Frederick Pollock created two categories of persecution — "tribal or political" and "theological" — in order to distinguish between Christian persecution of pagans (bad) and Roman persecution of Christians (not so bad). Arnaldo Momigliano used something akin to this reasoning to deny that the tribunal in Plato's *Laws* was intolerant, arguing that "Greece never knew the official interpretation of a religious doctrine by a church, and Plato was Greek". The image is so effective that at least one scholar has put forth a definition of "paganism" that virtually equates it with "toleration".¹⁰ Yet this reasoning depends on two premisses, neither of which would find ready acceptance among scholars today: first, that political and religious beliefs can be separated in the ancient state as easily as they can in the modern; secondly, that "popular" and "élite" piety in this age were two distinct categories.

As stated, the argument takes on the nature of a *a priori* truth: Christianity does deny the existence of other gods, and polytheism does not. But toleration as a government-sanctioned practice — the sense on which most discussion of the phenomenon relies — is not attested before the sixteenth century, leaving open the question whether in that sense the concept rightly applies to the ancient world at all. The confusion extends beyond this legal

⁹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ed. Bury, ii, p. 87 (ch. 16).

¹⁰ Momigliano's argument is found in his "Freedom of Speech and Religious Tolerance in the Ancient World", in S. C. Humphreys (ed.), *Anthropology and the Greeks* (London, 1978), p. 188. For Pollock's argument, see "The Theory of Persecution", in his *Essays in Jurisprudence and Ethics* (London, 1882), pp. 144-75 (echoed in J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York, 1993), pp. xxiii-xxviii). For "paganism" defined as essentially an attitude rather than a system of beliefs, see James O'Donnell, "The Demise of Paganism", *Traditio*, xxxv (1979), pp. 45-87 (in other respects a path-breaking article).

objection. In the simple sense of hostility to something new or foreign, every group is at least potentially intolerant.¹¹ But there are several ways in which the word “intolerant” is commonly used, making slippage inevitable and distinctions necessary. The first is between “intolerant” and “exclusive”, two terms often used interchangeably. Gibbon, for instance, writes of “intolerant zeal” at the start of his famous fifteenth chapter, but only of “exclusive zeal” in his recapitulation, some fifty pages later.¹² Persons who maintain the exclusive truth of their belief often also deny the validity of other beliefs. Such persons may refuse to associate with those who hold different beliefs, and may even refuse to recognize their right to do so. In this sense, then, exclusivity and intolerance do, indeed, overlap. In this sense, too, it is possible to speak of an intolerance innate to Christianity, with the understanding that intolerance of this sort is certainly not *unique* to Christianity, and that one may keep apart from variant beliefs without denying the right of those beliefs to exist. More important for present purposes is the distinction between intolerance and coercion. While both terms imply denial of the right to hold a variant belief, intolerance is theoretical or relatively passive, whereas coercion is actual and active, involving use of force either to prevent variant belief or to insist on conformity to prevailing belief.

On the basis of these distinctions, it is permissible to say that pre-Constantinian Christianity was certainly “exclusive”, and perhaps also “intolerant”, in the non-coercive sense. But it must be equally apparent that in the first three centuries it was not Christian, but pagan voices that uttered periodic demands for the suppression of variant belief and conformity to prevailing practice. As Gibbon noticed, Christians’ refusal to participate in the rites of the dominant community makes them stand out as peculiarly exclusive or even intolerant. But Peter Garnsey has seen an equally important distinction that escaped Gibbon’s notice, which is that Christians were also the only group in antiquity clearly to enunciate conditions for practising religious toleration as a

¹¹ The theoretical lines are laid out in P. King, *Toleration* (New York, 1976), ch. 1.

¹² Cf. “[t]he inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians”; “[i]t was by the aid of these causes, exclusive zeal [etc.] . . . that Christianity spread itself with so much success in the Roman empire”: Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ed. Bury, ii, pp. 3, 57 (ch. 15).

principle, rather than as an expedient.¹³ Even Tertullian, whose poignant cry, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?", epitomizes the clash of Christianity and classical culture, held that the free exercise of religious choice was a tenet of "both man-made and natural law", and that religion was "something to be taken up voluntarily, not under duress".¹⁴ As late as the eve of Constantine's conversion, the "Christian Cicero" Lactantius faulted his pagan adversaries for relying on strength instead of persuasion, and called on them to:

imitate us, that they may expose the plan of the whole matter; for we do not entice that they may object to it, but we teach, we prove, we explain. And therefore no one is retained by us against his will — for he is useless to God who is without devotion and faith . . .¹⁵

Here, then, is the problem: if early Christians could speak for toleration as well as intolerance, it is no longer possible to account for the turn to coercion by a newly empowered Christianity in the fourth century with the premiss that such coercion was a natural, logical or inevitable outcome of predilections inherent in and unique to that faith.

¹³ P. Garnsey, "Religious Toleration in Classical Antiquity", in W. J. Sheils (ed.), *Persecution and Toleration* (Studies in Church Hist., xxi, Oxford, 1984), pp. 1-27. Cf. P. Brown, "St. Augustine's Attitude to Religious Coercion", *Jl Roman Studies*, liv (1964), pp. 107-16, esp. p. 111. Other reappraisals have produced varying results: see, for example, J. North, "Religious Toleration in Republican Rome", *Proc. Cambridge Philological Soc.*, new ser., xxv (1979), pp. 85-103; J. Armstrong, "The Way and the Ways: Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in the Fourth Century A.D.", *Vigiliae Christianae*, xxxviii (1984), pp. 1-17; L. Cracco Ruggini, "Intolerance: Equal and Less Equal in the Roman World", *Classical Philology*, lxxxii (1987), pp. 187-205; L. Padovese, "Intolleranza e libertà religiosa nel IV secolo: alcune considerazioni", *Laurentianum*, xxxiii (1992), pp. 579-90; P. Brown, "The Problem of Christianization", *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, lxxxii (1993), pp. 89-106.

¹⁴ Tertullian's defiant rejection of classical training, "Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? quid academiae et ecclesiae? quid haereticis et christianis?", is found in his *De praescriptione haereticorum*, vii.9: *Tertulliani opera*, ed. E. Dekkers et al., 2 vols. (Corpus Christianorum, series latina, i-ii, Turnhout, 1954), i, p. 193; my translation. For the other quotations cited, see Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam*, ii.2: *Tertulliani opera*, ed. Dekkers et al., ii, p. 127; my translation. Cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, xxviii.1: "it should be counted quite absurd for one man to compel another to do honour to the gods, when he ought ever voluntarily, and in the sense of his own need, to seek their favour": *Tertulliani opera*, ed. Dekkers et al., i, p. 139; trans. S. Thelwall, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translation of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, 24 vols. (Edinburgh, 1867-72), i, p. 108.

¹⁵ Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, v.19: *L. Caeli Firmiani Lactanti opera omnia*, ed. S. Brandt and G. Lachmann, 2 vols. in 3 (C.S.E.L., xix, xx, xxvii, Vienna, 1890-7), i, p. 464; *Divine Institutes*, trans. Sister M. F. McDonald (Fathers of the Church, xlix, Washington, D.C., 1964), p. 378.

By looking askance at a historical tradition that in his day had been polluted by stereotypes of ravening pagans and innocent martyrs, Gibbon put every student of history forever in his debt. But the truest way to honour that debt is to look with the same critical eye at other assumptions, however cherished, that may similarly inhibit our own thinking.

II

HISTORY AND THEORY

How, then, shall we account for the active intolerance — including persecution and coercion — that unquestionably became manifest once Christians gained access to power? There are two potentially fruitful lines of enquiry, one theoretical, the other political.

Theoretical explanations from Christians in late antiquity are hard to come by. Virtually the only exception is Augustine, and here — as Peter Brown astutely observes — only because he was faced with an organized and articulate opposition in the Donatists, heirs to that tenacious schism that had emerged almost a century earlier.¹⁶ Brown might have made a further point, that Augustine was spurred into action as much by the particular argument these opponents used as by their ability to argue. For, as an exchange of letters between Augustine and the Donatist bishop Petilianus over the bishop of Hippo's sanction of government force shows, the Donatists based their protest squarely on Scripture. Petilianus writes:

The Lord Jesus Christ commands us, saying, "When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another". Do you serve God in such wise that we should be murdered at your hands? You do err, you do err, if you are wretched enough to entertain such a belief as this. For God does not have butchers for His priests.

Rattling off the Beatitudes — "Blessed are the merciful", "Blessed are the peacemakers" — Petilianus makes full use of the Christian pacifist tradition, epitomized in Jesus' commandment to "love your enemies", to put Augustine on the defensive.¹⁷

¹⁶ Peter Brown, "Religious Coercion in the Later Roman Empire: The Case of North Africa", *History*, xlviii (1963), p. 289. See also J. Vanderspoel, "The Background to Augustine's Denial of Religious Plurality", in H. A. Meynell (ed.), *Grace, Politics and Desire: Essays on Augustine* (Calgary, 1990), pp. 179-93.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Contra litteras Petiliani* (written in 405), ii.67, 68: *Sancti Aurelii Augustini scripta contra Donatistas*, ed. M. Petschenig, 2 vols. (C.S.E.L., li-lii, Vienna

(cont. on p. 12)

In modern terms, Petilianus was “seizing the moral high ground”, for to argue from Scripture was to lay claim to the true Christian heritage. This claim is what Augustine was compelled to rebut.

With some justice, Augustine in his reply pointed to the hypocrisy of this tardy discovery by his opponents. Who first appealed for government support, he asks, and who made compact even with the apostate Julian? But finger-pointing hardly answered the real issue, and Augustine clearly feels embarrassed and compromised by Petilianus’ arguments. To combat this assault, he ultimately evoked a parallel tradition of Christian battle against evil. Did Christ turn the other cheek to the demons, he asks? Or did he not even persecute “with bodily chastisement those whom He drove with scourges from the temple”?¹⁸ With this as his entry, Augustine then creates a rationale for coercion that will haunt Christian thought for the next fifteen hundred years: coercion is not what makes people become Christian — divine grace does that. Coercion merely prevents people from doing ill, and thus may be regarded as a sort of medication for sick souls. He writes:

No one is indeed to be compelled to embrace the faith against his will; but by the severity, or one might rather say, by the mercy of God, it is common for treachery to be chastised with the scourge of tribulation. Is it the case, because the best morals are chosen by freedom of will, that therefore the worst morals are not punished by integrity of law? . . . If any laws, therefore, have been enacted against you, you are not thereby forced to do well, but are only prevented from doing ill . . .¹⁹

What the exchange between Augustine and Petilianus reveals is an ambiguity regarding the use of force that can be traced back to the core texts of Christian belief — a conflict between what, following Guy Stroumsa, I will call their “eristic” and “eirenic”, or combative and peaceable, elements.²⁰ This ambiguity has important ramifications, not only for the Enlightenment view of Christian intolerance, but also for later theories that accept the premiss of an inherent Christian predisposition to use coercion.

(n. 17 cont.)

and Leipzig, 1908-9), ii, pp. 98, 99; trans. J. R. King, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser., ed. Schaff, iv, p. 566.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, ii.80 (ed. Petschenig, ii, p. 110; trans. King, p. 571)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, ii.83 (ed. Petschenig, ii, pp. 112-13; trans. King, p. 572).

²⁰ G. Stroumsa, “Le radicalisme religieux du christianisme ancien”, in A. Le Boulluer and E. Patlagean (eds.), *Les retours aux Ecritures: fondamentalismes présents et passés* (Bibliothèque de l’Ecole des hautes études, Section des sciences religieuses, xcix, Louvain, 1993), pp. 357-82. I am grateful to the author for an opportunity to read an advance copy of this article, on which I have relied heavily in the following paragraphs.

Two of this century's most influential theorists, Weber and Freud, demonstrate the problem. Weber's concept of the "depoliticized" (*entpolitisiert*) builds on the eristic tradition represented in early Christian apocalyptic texts. Weber held that although these texts come from a time when the movement was still a marginal or disenfranchised group, they continued to be regarded as authoritative after Christians achieved power — or lost the "privilege of irresponsibility", as Stroumsa puts it. Thus they gave legitimacy to a programme of political violence. In contrast, Freud saw the basis for Christian intolerance in the eirenic passages of the same texts. Christianity's unconditional commandment to love all mankind, Freud held, saddles Christians with a dilemma that followers of either traditional or other exclusive religions do not face. These, being particularistic by nature, simply ignore or despise outsiders. But the Christian commandment is universal, obliging Christians to love outsiders as well as insiders. Such an obligation creates a deep, existential need to explain the conduct of those who spurn their love. In a variant on the theme of "Hell hath no fury", Freud held that Christians resolve this problem by denying legitimacy to the beliefs of outsiders, a solution that in turn justifies the use of violence against such groups.

There are important insights in both these positions. Freud's analysis, for instance, gives the lie to one of the more commonplace solutions, which posits that the eirenic injunction to love one's neighbour applied only to the internal, Christian community, with hatred reserved for the external, pagan enemy.²¹ But for all their insight on the theoretical level, as premisses for historical study the analyses of Freud and Weber suffer from the same handicap as the model they would replace: they presume that the answer lies in some quality inherent in Christianity. Moreover, each emphasizes only one facet of this Christian message. Neither addresses the contradictions in core Christian texts revealed by the exchange between Augustine and Petilianus; thus they fail to account either for coercive activity by non-Christians or for Christians who seem perfectly willing to tolerate the existence of other faiths. They depend upon the first of the three mistakes that underlie the standard model of Christian

²¹ Danny Praet summarizes the argument thus: "resentment against the religious outsider was the counterpart of the brotherly love that reigned within the Christian communities": D. Praet, "Explaining the Christianization of the Roman Empire: Older Theories and Recent Developments", *Sacris Erudiri*, xxxiii (1992-3), p. 70.

intolerance: the assumption that there was only one early Christian tradition that was genuinely orthodox, and that this never varied in its attitude towards the pagan majority. Creation of an ecumenical organization is indeed a genuine triumph of the early church. But the type of monolithic Christianity required by this assumption is one that we can now be fairly certain never existed. The early church contained a number of different points of view, not just about theology but also about the role Christians should play in the state and how they should respond to outsiders. Alan Wardman has coined the phrase "church of the multitude" to distinguish "Christians with the habit of compromise" from rigorists in the "church of the martyrs".²²

The "structural ambiguity" in Christian core texts extends to their teaching regarding the Christian relationship to the state, with St Paul teaching that emperors should be obeyed as being appointed by God, and the author of Revelation conceiving a more adversarial relationship. For every Tertullian who saw Rome and Christianity in opposition to each other there was a Melito or Eusebius arguing for the identical destiny of the two systems.²³ Nor are there simple correlations to be made between commitment to classical culture and religious freedom, as

²² Wardman, *Religion and Statecraft among the Romans*, p. 136. The idea of a single, well-defined church beset by equally well-defined heretical movements is central to the work of the earliest church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, whose *Historia Ecclesiastica* (c.300), set the pattern for all later work. For a sensitive evaluation of this much-studied topic, see R. A. Markus, "Church History and Early Church Historians", in D. Baker (ed.), *The Materials, Sources and Methods of Ecclesiastical History* (Studies in Church Hist., xi, Cambridge, 1975), pp. 1-17; for Eusebius' influence, see G. Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories: Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret and Evagrius*, 2nd edn (Macon, 1986), ch. 11, and G. Chesnut, "Eusebius, Augustine, Orosius, and the Later Patristic and Medieval Christian Historians", in H. Attridge and G. Hata (eds.), *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Detroit, 1992), pp. 687-713. Walter Bauer has decisively challenged the view of a single, central Christian tradition: W. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, 2nd edn (Tübingen, 1964); for an English translation, see *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971), trans. by a team from the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins, ed. R. A. Kraft and G. Krodel.

²³ In an *Apologia* addressed to the emperor Marcus Aurelius around 175, Bishop Melito of Sardis synchronized the rise of the Roman Empire under Augustus with the birth of Christ, and suggested that the two had been mutually beneficial: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iv.26 (*Eusebius Werke*, i: *Die Kirchengeschichte*, ed. E. Schwartz, 3 vols. (G.C.S., ix, Leipzig, 1903-9), i, pp. 380-8; trans. A. C. McGiffert, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., ed. Schaff and Wace, i, pp. 203-6). A century and a half later, Eusebius took the case a step further in a speech dedicating Constantine's Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in 335, in which he described the two as part of the same plan to establish one God and one Empire: *De laudibus Constantini*, xvi.5-6 (*Eusebius Werke*, i: *Über das Leben Constantins* . . . , ed. I. A.

Tertullian, who rejected the one but supported the other, shows. In the third century, the persecutions of Decius and Valerian should not overshadow the fact that most of that century was a lively period of peaceful exchange between pagan and Christian intellectuals, when Christians attended the lectures of pagan teachers and pagans dedicated books to Christian bishops. This is particularly true of the forty years between the end of persecution under Gallienus in 261 and its renewal by Diocletian in 302.²⁴

III

CHRISTIANITY AS A MASS MOVEMENT

Given the existence of an eirenic as well as an eristic tradition in Christianity, theoretical explanations cannot simply rely on only one of these traditions for an answer; they must also explain why one prevailed over the other. It may be easier to do this by

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Heikel (G.C.S., vii, Leipzig, 1902), pp. 249-50; trans. H. A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine* (Berkeley, 1976), p. 120). On the broader issue of Christian adoption of classical culture, see C. N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (Oxford, 1940; repr. New York, 1957); W. Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961); H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (Oxford, 1966; repr. 1985); M. Simon, *La civilisation de l'Antiquité et le christianisme* (Paris, 1972); C. Stead, "Greek Influence on Christian Thought", in I. Hazlett (ed.), *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to A.D. 600* (Nashville, 1991), pp. 175-85.

²⁴ Eusebius looked back on the period between Gallienus' edict and the renewal of persecution as a golden age, when Christians were appointed to governorships, and the emperors, "on account of the great friendship which they entertained toward their doctrine, released them from anxiety in regard to sacrificing": Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, viii.1.1-4 (ed. Schwartz, ii, p. 736; trans. McGiffert, p. 323). E. R. Dodds refers to these and other accommodations as efforts "to absorb Christ into the Establishment": E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 107. Eusebius also writes proudly of the secular learning of such Christian scholars as Origen of Alexandria and Bishop Anatolius of Laodicea, though without revealing the extent of their Neopythagorean and Neoplatonic training: Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, vi.1-3, vii.32.6-20 (ed. Schwartz, ii, pp. 518-30, 718-26; trans. McGiffert, pp. 249-52, 318-20). See R. M. Grant, "Early Alexandrian Christianity", *Church History*, xl (1971), pp. 133-44; J. L. Heiberg, "Anatolius sur les dix premiers nombres", in *Annales internationales d'histoire: Congrès de Paris, 1900*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1901-2), v, pp. 27-41. The traditional identification of Ammonius as the teacher of both the Neoplatonist Plotinus and the Christian theologian Origen may be in doubt, but what is significant is that such a shared intellectual pedigree seemed plausible to both Christian and pagan contemporaries: M. Edwards, "Ammonius, Teacher of Origen", *Jl Eccles. Hist.*, xlv (1993), pp. 169-81. For arguments that the philosopher Calcidius dedicated his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* to Bishop Ossius of Cordoba no later than the early fourth century, see Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 74.

looking at the problem in the context of an entirely different dynamic. Augustine suggests what that dynamic might be in another of his arguments, this one in response to Vincentius. If not a Donatist himself, Vincentius was at least open-minded enough to realize that Augustine had not fully satisfied the objections of his opponents. He also had the consummate bad taste to throw back at him some of the bishop's own earlier writings against the use of force. Clearly nettled, Augustine responds to his interrogator with ridicule. In doing so, he opens a new line of argument. "You say you do not wish to act cruelly", he writes; "I think you are not able. You are so few in number that you would not dare to act against opponents who are more numerous than you, even if you wished". It all boils down, in other words, to numbers. "If the Jews and pagans thought the Christians were as few in number as you are", Augustine writes, "they would not bother to curse us, they would never stop laughing at us".²⁵ Like so much of Augustine, this argument would seem to be yet another proof text for inherent Christian intolerance. But is it? Its significance does not lie in its moral appeal, much less in its theological purity. Rather, it is significant because it argues from a practical, rather than theoretical, basis: it is a rationale not of principle, but of power. Pagans in power persecuted, and now, Augustine says in effect, we Christians compel because we are able. He points us, thus, away from the internal and theological causes of Christian intolerance that lie at the heart of the standard model and in the direction of a more general, and secular, explanation.

In raising a new series of issues that is essentially political rather than ideological, Augustine's response to Vincentius suggests that the dynamic moving these events is to be found not in Christianity itself, but in the traits that Christianity shares with other successful mass movements. It also changes the nature of the question. No longer is it important to ask what in Christianity is conducive to intolerant or coercive behaviour. Rather, the question is how persons who would use force to achieve uniformity of belief come to prevail when they represent only one of many alternatives in the same mass movement.²⁶

²⁵ Augustine, *Epistula xciii* (ed. Goldbacher, i, pp. 455, 471; trans. Parsons, pp. 67, 82).

²⁶ Gibbon was by no means oblivious to the importance of organization to the success of Christianity, listing it fifth among his reasons (see n. 6 above). But his premiss of intolerance removed the possibility of internal struggle, and led him to

A great deal of attention has been paid to this question in the context of revolution, or the capture of a state by a revolutionary movement. But such studies are of limited use in trying to understand the takeover of a group rather than a polity. Although violence may be the *result* of the victory of a militant wing, unlike revolutionary situations violence is not the *cause* of that victory. This is a crucial distinction, one that changes entirely the morphology of the process. Violence is, by definition, an essential component of political revolution.²⁷ Movements, of course, may also be captured by violent means. But the type of capture in question here is significant precisely because it is not achieved primarily by violence: even though intimidation of one sort or another may be involved, success only comes by winning what may properly be called a debate, even if formal forensic criteria are not much in evidence. As in the case of the exchange between Augustine and Petilianus, it is a debate over the core values of the group, a contest for the mantle of legitimacy. Such a debate can only be won by achieving voluntary recognition that one's position best represents, advances and preserves those values. In this sense, it is precisely the non-revolutionary aspect that requires study.

To this topic, relatively little attention has been paid. Augustine's answer to Vincentius thus opens a door that allows us to consider ways in which the Christian movement, for all its unique origins and goals, shares the characteristics of, and is subject to the same influences as, any political "group" (a term that may be left intentionally vague, since the aim here is merely to make the question "political" rather than "theological"). Doing so reveals the weakness of the second assumption underlying the standard model for Christian intolerance. This is the assumption that coercive behaviour is normative for Christians, an assumption that in turn depends on defining Christianity according to its eristic component. One way to avoid this error is to move outside

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see the role of the organization as merely one of realizing, or implementing, this inherent quality.

²⁷ So M. Rejai, *The Strategy of Political Revolution* (Garden City, 1973), p. 8: "Revolutionary change does not take place except through violence". Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, rev. edn (New York, 1965), remains a useful attempt to identify the salient characteristics of revolutionary movements. See also H. Eckstein, "Explaining Collective Political Violence", in his *Regarding Politics: Essays on Political Theory, Stability, and Change* (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 304-40 (first publ in T. R. Gurr (ed.), *Handbook of Political Conflict: Theory and Research* (New York, 1980), pp. 135-66).

the realm of religion for traits that Christianity shares with other successful mass movements, secular or religious. The one characteristic of interest here is the ability of such movements to harbour conflicting and even mutually contradictory beliefs under the same broad roof. Here, for instance, lies the significance of the ambiguities Stroumsa recognized in Christianity's core texts. Even "single-issue" movements, if they become large enough to appeal to a relatively heterogeneous constituency, will have factions or wings that differ in some way — if not on specific interpretations of their general goal, for instance, then perhaps on means of implementation or definitions of leadership. In the normal course of events, such opposing concepts live quite happily side by side, thanks to the ability we humans have to compartmentalize our views, and to come together on common ground with others who do not think like us in every particular.²⁸ The ability to provide this common ground and to balance unresolved tensions is essential to creation of a stable majority. A central message that is broadly stated, ambiguous and ill-defined helps create this stability.

Theologically untidy they may be, but in practical terms such ambiguities are a source of strength, for two reasons. First, they bring together a much broader spectrum of interests than is possible for an organization tightly focused around a single, coherent issue. Secondly, they provide the conceptual flexibility such an organization needs to be able to respond successfully to changing circumstances. As a new movement, Christianity faced two challenges to succeed: the first, to develop sufficient appeal to the majority culture to attract a critical mass of members; the second, to do so without letting that culture completely absorb its identity and the alternative message it offered.²⁹ The requirement to love their enemies kept Christians in the early centuries from turning completely inwards, walling themselves off from a hostile environment, while the need to resist Satan gave them the fortitude

²⁸ On the need to make allowance for the pressure of conflicting beliefs in studying popular ideologies, see G. Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York, 1980), pp. 23, 31. David Truman observes the same phenomenon: "Organized interest groups are never solid and monolithic . . .": D. B. Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*, 2nd edn (New York, 1971), p. 518.

²⁹ R. Stark, "How New Religions Succeed: A Theoretical Model", in D. Bromley and P. Hammond (eds.), *The Future of New Religious Movements* (Macon, 1987), pp. 11-29; cf. R. Hefner, "World Building and the Rationality of Conversion", in R. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 3-44.

in those same centuries to withstand persecution. However contradictory, both concepts were integral to the success of the Christian movement, and both are equally valid.

Thus the real problem with Augustine's answer to Vincentius is not that it is "political", but that it is incomplete. His ill-tempered crowing does not explain how his side came to be the party in power or, what is more germane to the question at issue, how that party came to regard coercion as an acceptable means to achieve its goals. Nevertheless, in calling attention to the role of numbers, Augustine helps to reshape and redirect the question, from one of theological principle to one of political process: how does a militant element take control of a movement? Every movement has such persons, yet not all mass movements allow them free rein, nor do all that do so succeed.

While there is a considerable literature on the mechanisms of mass movements on the one hand, and on the nature and consequences of extremism on the other, a paradigm for the means by which extremists capture control of a mass movement has yet to be designed. Here, for instance, is where Weber's insight into the nature of the "depoliticized" fails — it explains why such individuals once in power might be inclined to act as they do, but by assuming that all Christians displayed such characteristics it does not address conditions that allowed those who did so to gain control over those who did not.

IV

CONFLICT OR COEXISTENCE?

As with so much else in the history of early Christianity, the conversion of Constantine the Great is pivotal to the question of Christian coercion. If Constantine converted to a militant version of Christian belief, then the traditional account of Christian intolerance as it developed in the fourth century might still stand, for then it would simply be a matter of arguing that his conversion is what hijacked the Christian movement and turned lambs into lions. But when Constantine's conversion is looked at as a matter of choosing among a spectrum of Christian attitudes regarding the use of force to compel belief, the record is abundantly clear that he sided consistently with those Christians who favoured

consensus, and that he sought a broadly inclusive definition of the faith.³⁰

Although Constantine's conversion has traditionally been studied for indications of his "sincerity", the question it raises here is not one of sincerity but of leadership, part of what Glen Bowersock has called "the self-conscious transformation of political power" that occurred during this century.³¹ There was a subtle but important difference in the way effective leadership was exercised in the Christian organization in contradistinction to Roman government. To put it crudely, whereas a Roman emperor proved his worth by success in battle and by showing a reasonable regard for administrative and judicial customs, the Christian organization required its leaders to demonstrate worthiness through acts of prayer and ministry. On one level, this difference meant that while the Roman leader listened to speeches about virtue, the Christian leader gave speeches exhorting others to virtue. On another, it meant that a Christian leader could not achieve his goals by will or fiat; he had to persuade others that both he and his goals conformed to Christian principles. These different conditions explain Constantine's well-known penchant for speech-making and moral exhortation, attested by his enemies as well as his admirers.³² By evangelization, Constantine proved his personal worth. At the same time, he found a way to cover his flank against attack by Christian militants.

On one well-known occasion, Constantine was forced to tangle with these militants. Shortly after taking control of the eastern empire in 324, he issued an encyclical letter "On the Error of Polytheism". The final paragraph of the letter, included by Eusebius in his *Life of Constantine*, makes clear that at least one purpose was to put an end to assaults on the temples by over-zealous Christians:

³⁰ I develop this argument more fully elsewhere: H. A. Drake, "Constantine and Consensus", *Church History*, lxiv (1995), pp. 1-15. See also H. A. Drake, "Policy and Belief in Constantine's 'Oration to the Saints' ", *Studia Patristica*, xix (1989), pp. 43-51.

³¹ Bowersock, "From Emperor to Bishop", *passim*.

³² Eusebius praises Constantine's frequent efforts to educate the masses of Constantinople: *De vita Constantini*, iv.29 (ed. Winkelman, pp. 130-1; trans. Richardson, p. 547). The pagan Eunapius says that the speeches were only attended by drunks who came for the free wine: Eunapius, *Vitae sophistorum*, 462 (*Philostratus and Eunapius: Lives of the Sophists*, ed. and trans. W. C. Wright (Loeb Classical Library, cxxxiv, Cambridge, Mass., 1921), p. 383). Richard Lim adds another dimension to Constantine's speech-making in his *Public Disputation, Power and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1995), esp. pp. 24-30.

I have said these things and gone through them at greater length than my customary concern requires, since I did not wish my belief in the truth to be hidden, and especially because I hear some people are saying the customs of the temples and the power of darkness have been taken away. I should, indeed, have advised this very thing to all men, if the violent opposition of wicked error were not immoderately embedded in some souls, to the detriment of our common salvation.³³

Although it is couched in the gentlest possible terms, the intent of this passage is undeniable: Constantine was making it known that he did not support, and would not sanction, militant attacks on pagan worship.

His stand entailed risks. Christians as well as pagans recognized the emperor as a sacral and charismatic figure, but a history of persecuting emperors had made Christians conscious of limits to the obedience they owed "Caesar". As a convert, and a relatively late one at that, Constantine's sacral authority was potentially compromised — a reality that the enormous popularity of his conversion story in subsequent generations has obscured. The language of the encyclical indicates the method he adopted to neutralize this opposition. Using angry language to win the sympathy of the very militants whose will he thwarted, he gave a moral gloss to a policy of toleration by exploiting the Christian message of peace. Building on this message, he used the edict to pronounce a policy:

Once more, let none use that to the detriment of another which he may himself have received on conviction of its truth; but let everyone, if it be possible, apply what he has understood and known to the benefit of his neighbor; if otherwise, let him relinquish the attempt. For it is one thing voluntarily to undertake the conflict for immortality, another to compel others to do so from the fear of punishment.³⁴

In the same way, Constantine elsewhere turned the Christian martyr from an icon of militant resistance into a symbol of infinite patience, thereby reinforcing his argument that it is better to endure than to inflict harm.³⁵

³³ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, ii.60.2 (ed. Winkelmann, p. 72; my translation).

³⁴ For the letter, see *ibid.*, ii.48-60 (ed. Winkelmann, pp. 68-72; trans. Richardson, pp. 512-15), esp. ii.56.2 and ii.60.1 (ed. Winkelmann, pp. 71, 72; trans. Richardson, pp. 513-14).

³⁵ In the *Oratio ad Sanctos*, xii.3-4: *Über das Leben Constantins . . .*, ed. Heikel, p. 171; trans. E. C. Richardson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., ed. Schaff and Wace, i, p. 570. See Drake, "Constantine and Consensus", p. 13. A long debate over the authenticity of the *Oratio*, touched off by J.-P. Rossignol in 1845 and continued by I. A. Heikel in his edition of the text in 1902, once prevented scholars from making full use of the document. Baynes, for instance, felt obliged to hold it at arm's length. Although textual problems remain, these now appear soluble, and more

This was Constantine's art: to take steps to please militants while at the same time cutting the ground from under them. He used their own rhetoric both to neutralize militant opposition and to give himself moral cover against a charge of being "soft on paganism". In modern parlance, he seized control of the discourse, using the structural ambiguities in the Christian message to isolate Christians who advocated coercive measures, making them appear to be at variance with the faith's core teachings and thereby vulnerable to a charge of extremism. Doing so, he neutralized the potential liability that his policies entailed. Even the most hardline rigorist would have difficulty opposing a policy that seemed to flow directly from the Master's teaching. By exploiting the eirenic side of the Gospel message, Constantine succeeded in creating a coalition of Christians and pagans who believed there was sufficient common ground for them to coexist comfortably in a government from which neither would be excluded. Almost thirty years after Constantine's death in 337, the career minister Themistius, himself a pagan who served comfortably under Christian emperors, continued to advocate this policy with some eloquence.³⁶

V

THE DYNAMICS OF INTOLERANCE

To read Constantine's writings is, thus, to read a casebook study in how to neutralize militant groups. Constantine did so by combining a militant posture with deft use of Jesus as a model of forbearance and love. He created a rhetorical environment, in other words, in which Christians who favoured coercive measures looked like extremists. He was undoubtedly aided in this task by a general revulsion against coercive activity in the wake of

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recent scholars have been inclined to accept it as authentic. See J.-P. Rossignol, *Virgile et Constantin le Grand* (Paris, 1845); *Über das Leben Constantins* . . . , ed. Heikel, pp. xci-cii; Baynes, "Constantine the Great and the Christian Church", p. 394; D. Ison, "The Constantinian Oration to the Saints: Authorship and Background" (Univ. of London Ph.D. thesis, 1985); E. Fisher, "Greek Translations of Latin Literature in the Fourth Century A.D.", *Yale Classical Studies*, xxvii (1982), pp. 173-215; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 74.

³⁶ Themistius, *Oratio v*, delivered to the Emperor Jovian on 1 January 364; see esp. 67B-70A: *Themistii orationes quae supersunt*, ed. H. Schenkl, G. Downey and A. F. Norman, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1965-74), i, pp. 98-103; trans. E. Barker, *From Alexander to Constantine: Passages and Documents Illustrating the History of Social and Political Ideas, 336 B.C.-A.D. 337* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 378-80.

Diocletian's great persecution. Still, it is precisely this accomplishment — creation of a consensus in favour of an inclusive, non-coercive Christianity — that the modern model of Christian-pagan relations masks. Because of it, even those scholars who acknowledge the toleration of the age of Constantine see it only as a bridge, a transitory stage, a pause in an inevitable march.³⁷ To see his accomplishment in this way not only trivializes the achievement, but also obscures an important question: if such a consensus was capable of being achieved and if, as argued here, there was no inherent Christian tendency to use coercion, then what caused the shift to a more coercive posture by the century's end? How were the militants who had been neutralized by Constantine able to capture the Christian movement within half a century of his death?

To attempt a complete answer to so large a question would be premature. The turn to coercion was clearly part of a larger and more complicated process of re-examination and self-definition that was under way during these decades, manifesting itself not only in the well-known theological debates, but also in clashes over the relative merits of virginity and marriage, and of secular and ascetic vocations.³⁸ Furthermore, what is certainly an important part of the problem can be glimpsed only in outline. This is the dilemma posed by the large number of converts who swelled Christian ranks in the decades following Constantine's conversion. For the most part, scholarly interest in these converts has taken its cue from concerns voiced by contemporaries: what was the effect of this flood of hasty and sometimes insincere initiates on the purity of the Christian community? Hence the long-standing concern to distinguish between "semi-Christians",

³⁷ The position is stated succinctly by Arnaldo Momigliano: "if there were men who recommended tolerance and peaceful coexistence of Christians and pagans, they were rapidly crowded out": A. Momigliano, "Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century A.D.", in A. Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), p. 80. Cf. Momigliano, "Freedom of Speech and Religious Tolerance in the Ancient World", p. 191.

³⁸ See R. A. Markus, "The Problem of Self-Definition: From Sect to Church", in E. P. Sanders *et al.* (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, 3 vols. (London, 1980-2), i, pp. 1-15; D. Hunter, "Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome", *Jl Early Christian Studies*, i (1993), pp. 47-71; P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men and Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988); J. Wortley, "The Spirit of Rivalry in Early Christian Monachism", *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, xxxiii (1992), pp. 383-404.

"demi-Christians" and "semi-pagans".³⁹ The complaint occurs as early as the 330s, when Eusebius of Caesarea lamented that one effect of Constantine's edict against the heretics was that these "pests of society", masking their real beliefs, "crept secretly into the church".⁴⁰

A different question needs to be asked: what was the effect of this new relationship on the converts themselves? A commonplace holds that "there is no zealot like a convert". Assuming this to be true, it would be tempting to hold the converts responsible for destroying the consensus forged by Constantine. But this solution begs an even more important question: why is it that this zeal came to express itself in acts of violence instead of love and forbearance? Why did the eristic Christian become the one to emulate? Some historians, indeed, have seen these converts in a more positive light, acting as a bridge that would have made it easier for others to make the transition to the new faith.⁴¹ In this view, the converts comprised a large body that was able, at least potentially, to serve as a mediating force between Christian and pagan communities, thereby maintaining the Constantinian coalition against militant pressure for coercive action. If, at least theoretically, these converts could have expressed their zeal through acts of love rather than intolerance, then what prevented them from playing this mediating role?

The voices of fourth-century converts are too silent ever to provide a satisfactory answer to this question. But some insight can be gained by turning to the work of twentieth-century historians who once drew a connection between the huge numbers of immigrants who flooded into the United States earlier in the century and the right-leaning super-patriotism that manifested itself in the 1950s and 1960s. Later generations have rightly criticized these scholars for facile methodology and arbitrary

³⁹ C. Guignebert, "Les demi-Chrétiens et leur place dans l'Eglise antique", *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, lxiii (1923), pp. 65-102; G. Bonner, "The Extinction of Paganism and the Church Historian", *Jl Eccles. Hist.*, xxxv (1984), pp. 339-57.

⁴⁰ Eusebius, *De vita Constantini*, iii.63, iii.66 (ed. Winkelmann, pp. 117, 119; trans. Richardson, pp. 539-40). In the fifth century, another church historian, Sozomen, describing the conversions that followed Constantine's confiscation of temple treasures, adds that others, "envious of the honor in which Christians were held by the emperor, deemed it necessary to imitate the acts of the ruler": *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ii.5 (*Kirchengeschichte*, ed. J. Bidez and G. C. Hansen, Berlin, 1950, p. 57; trans. C. D. Hartranft, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., ed. Schaff and Wace, ii, p. 262).

⁴¹ As Gerald Bonner puts it, they would have "cushioned the shock": Bonner, "Extinction of Paganism and the Church Historian", p. 350.

assumptions. Their central premiss, however, remains sound: in a polity that defines itself by allegiance to an ideology rather than by ties of kinship or tradition, large numbers of immigrants constitute a destabilizing force; in situations where the host community comes to feel itself at risk, this group can feel particularly vulnerable and exposed.⁴²

If conversion to Christianity is thought of as a kind of immigration, an imaginative transfer of these conditions to the fourth century might make it possible to add one piece to the puzzle of Christian coercion. Is it legitimate to make such a transfer? Like modern nation-states, the Christian community identified itself on the basis of a common allegiance, rather than a common ancestry. This difference was widely, and proudly, acknowledged by Christians themselves, from the earliest times, when Paul taught the mixed Jewish-gentile community in Rome that "we, being many, are one body in Christ". Commonly, Christians referred to themselves as a "third nation", a "nation apart", pilgrims in a foreign land.⁴³ Furthermore, like American immigrants this fourth-century group would unavoidably have been made up of adult newcomers who consequently brought with them habits and beliefs, assumptions and predispositions about nature and the world acquired from the culture in which they had grown up.⁴⁴ In the broadly latitudinarian climate that Constantine had created by aligning his policies with the eirenic

⁴² I refer in particular to a series of articles published in the 1950s and 1960s by Richard Hofstadter, conveniently collected in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1965). Hofstadter's infelicitous phrase, "the paranoid style", and some questionable methodology, has brought his work into disrepute. For a critique, see L. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 237, and, more generally, W. Ellis, "Evolution, Fundamentalism, and the Historians: An Historiographical Review", *Historian*, xlv (1981), pp. 15-35. See further H. A. Drake, "Fourth-Century Christianity and 'The Paranoid Style'", in T. W. Hillard *et al.* (eds.), *Ancient History in a Modern University: Proceedings of a Conference Held at Macquarie University, 8-13 July 1993*, 2 vols. 3 pts (Grand Rapids, 1997), ii.

⁴³ Rom. 12:5; cf. I Cor. 10:17. On the "third race", see, with references, A. Harnack, "The Tidings of the New People and of the Third Race", in his *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. J. Moffatt, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (London, 1908; repr. New York, 1962), i, bk 2, ch. vii, pp. 240-78.

⁴⁴ Rodney Stark points out that the majority of members of a new movement with even modest growth will always be first-generation converts, and that those "who adopt a new faith are not eager to have changes made in its central doctrines": Stark, "How New Religions Succeed", p. 24. But as Alan Wardman observes, people "can well accept new beliefs and practices without having lost touch with established or traditional ideas and without realizing at first that a complete readjustment is necessary": Wardman, *Religion and Statecraft among the Romans*, p. 169. Ramsay

side of the Christian message, such a background would not have been a disability. Each convert would have been welcomed as one further proof of the irresistible truth of the new faith.

With a middle ground thus sufficiently broad and ill-defined, the converts might well have played the mediating role that they have been assigned in theory. However, should anything cause that middle ground to be eroded, making Christians feel less secure than they had become in the heady days of Constantine's rule, the same traits that would have made converts welcome in more comfortable days would now raise questions about their loyalty, reliability and commitment. This is precisely the environment in which peacemaking, the eirenic message, can cease to be a respectable activity and instead become a sign of cowardice or treachery. In modern times, the aim of creating a polarizing situation in order to remove the grey areas and force moderates to make a black-and-white choice is so well known as to require little comment. Here, at least, is one area where we can be certain that it is not anachronistic to look for such situations in the ancient world. The classic description of a polarizing situation remains Thucydides' chilling account of the course of revolution during the Peloponnesian War at the end of the fifth century B.C.:

To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defence. Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became a suspect . . . If an opponent made a reasonable speech, the party in power, so far from giving it a generous reception, took every precaution to see that it had no practical effect.⁴⁵

(n. 44 cont.)

MacMullen expresses the same thought when he remarks on the tendency of converts to adjust to the new faith in a way that makes "the least possible tear in the fabric of already held beliefs": MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, p. 21.

⁴⁵ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, iii.82.4-7: *Thucydidis Historiae*, ed. H. S. Jones, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (Oxford, repr. 1942), unpaginated; trans. R. Warner (Baltimore, 1954), p. 209. Thucydides' analysis is echoed in an account by a former member of the Pro-Life movement, trying to explain why it has proved so difficult for moderate voices to be heard in an issue that has become similarly polarized in her day. "You lose your sense of the world around you, staying more and more in your own cloistered society, protecting one another from outside thought. Your ability to reason is lost and the smallest compromise is viewed as betrayal. The movement itself splits between the militants and the moderates. Those less militant are seen as less

(cont. on p. 27)

In Christianity, a polarizing situation — one that brings internal contradictions into overt conflict — arises when the enemy who is supposed to be loved becomes identified as Satan, or demonized. In this situation, those militant Christians who had been marginalized by Constantine would have been able to change the prevailing rhetoric in a way that would bring their views into alignment with mainstream opinion. If the fourth-century converts were vulnerable to doubts regarding their loyalty — and the passage from Eusebius cited above is but one indication that they were — then a polarizing situation would explain why these potential voices for moderation came to condone violence — or, what amounts to the same thing, not to speak out against it.

According to the standard model of Christian-pagan relations, a hostile pagan majority, with which Christians were locked in a “life-and-death struggle”, posed the threat to Christian security that would create such a situation. But more recent scholarship has revealed a much different fourth-century environment, a richly interwoven world that defies easy division into “Christian” and “pagan” spheres.⁴⁶ Such a world would more adequately explain the converts themselves, since it would be unusual for a community engaged in the type of struggle long postulated to welcome suspect newcomers in the numbers that seem to have converted during this period.

The perception of a pagan-Christian struggle has been nourished by the prominence of anti-pagan argument in the surviving

(n. 45 cont.)

dedicated. Peer control begins to strangle individuality. You speak with one voice, not many. And at any time, the militant wing of your cause can turn on you, and you become the enemy”: S. C. McMillan, “A Single-Issue Activist Reconsiders Her Obsession”, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 June 1993.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., G. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor, 1990); M. R. Salzman, *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1990); W. Kinzig, “‘Non-Separation’: Closeness and Co-operation between Jews and Christians in the Fourth Century”, *Vigiliae Christianae*, xlv (1991), pp. 27-53. See also R. A. Markus, “Paganism, Christianity, and the Latin Classics in the Fourth Century”, in J. W. Binns (ed.), *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century* (London, 1974), pp. 1-21; J. Matthews, “The Letters of Symmachus”, *ibid.*, pp. 58-99. Averil Cameron discusses the importance of alternative approaches in “Redrawing the Map: Early Christian Territory after Foucault”, *Jl Roman Studies*, lxxvi (1986), pp. 266-71. The “conflict” view of pagan-Christian relations underlies the various articles in Momigliano (ed.), *Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*. A classic study cast in the mould of the “pagan revival” is H. Block, “A New Document of the Last Pagan Revival in the West”, *Harvard Theol. Rev.*, xxxviii (1945), pp. 199-244. The foundation on which such studies were based has been undermined by such works as P. Brown, “Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy”, *Jl Roman Studies*, li (1961), pp. 1-11;

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record. Despite such rhetoric, however, the full record shows clearly that the prime object of Christian hatred, at all times, were not pagans but heretics. Even Eusebius' complaint about the "pests of society" who had "crept" into the church appears to have been aimed more at heretics than pagans. Indeed, without the conditioning of a pagan-Christian conflict, this is precisely the pattern we would expect. At a distance, heretics may seem to be as much outsiders as pagans, clearly distinct from orthodox Christians. But on a closer inspection the picture is more blurred, for the simple reason that heretics do not see themselves as outsiders but as insiders — in fact as the "real" Christians. Only when the dialogue initiated by the particular heresy in question is resolved is it easy to see who is, and who is not, "orthodox".⁴⁷ In Jesus' famous caution against the wolves "in sheep's clothing" (Matt. 7:15), it is not the existence of "wolves" that provoked his warning, but their presence within the fold. What is at work is the need of all ideologically driven groups to deny legitimacy to dissidents — to cast them beyond the pale. What made heretics such a threat is precisely that, on the outside at least, they were indistinguishable from insiders. This ability to pass as insiders is what makes these "turncoats" a threat to the homogeneity of the community. They are the original "enemy within".

As a threat, heresy was the kind of issue that would turn the conflict between eristic and eirenic messages that had given Christianity so much flexibility in earlier centuries into a weapon for militant use. For within that conflict lay an unresolved tension between the commandment to love one's enemies and the equally strong injunction to reject Satan and all his acts. The reason for the tension is important. It is that in any given situation a Christian does not automatically know which commandment to follow. This uncertainty is what makes control of the discourse so vital an element in Christian history.⁴⁸ By attacking heretics as tools

(n. 46 cont.)

Alan Cameron, "Paganism and Literature in Late Fourth Century Rome", in M. Fuhrmann (ed.), *Christianisme et formes littéraires de l'Antiquité tardive en Occident* (Fondation Hardt, Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique, xxiii, Geneva, 1977), pp. 31–40; O'Donnell, "Demise of Paganism", *passim*.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Russell suggests that "the best way to understand heresy is in its symbiotic relationship with orthodoxy. Orthodoxy defines heresy, and heresy helps define orthodoxy": J. Russell, *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages: The Search for Legitimate Authority* (New York, 1992), p. 4.

⁴⁸ On the importance of Christian discourse, see Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*.

of Satan, Christian militants had precisely the kind of polarizing issue that would allow the more unyielding kind of Christian to seize the rhetorical high ground and shift the focus of the debate from loving one's enemy to opposing Satan — using Jesus' own words to do so, moreover, just as Constantine had done to accomplish the opposite.

Hatred of heresy was not new in the fourth century. What *was* new, however, was the option of bringing to bear the coercive power of the state. Certainly, surviving legislation indicates that even by the end of the century, imperial attention remained focused more on heresy than on paganism.⁴⁹ When Augustine ultimately reversed his own opposition to coercion, it was, he said, experience with heretics that led him to do so.⁵⁰ It was against heretics, not pagans, that Constantine directed his most ferocious rhetoric, and against heretics that the only clear evidence of coercive activity by him exists. Eusebius records an edict addressed to “Novatians, Valentinians, Marcionites, Paulians, ye who are called Cataphrygians and all ye who devise and support heresies by means of your private assemblies”, in which Constantine denounced their teachings as a “tissue of falsehood and vanity”, a “disease”, filled with “destructive and venomous errors” that smite healthy souls with fatal contagion. Here the emperor clearly renounced his policy of toleration — his willingness to “bear with such abounding evil”, as he put it — in favour of coercion. Ordering these groups to be stripped of their right of assembly, he also confiscated their meeting-houses and

⁴⁹ Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, p. 89. Cf. David Hunt, “Christianising the Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Code”, in J. Harries and I. Wood (eds.), *The Theodosian Code: Studies in the Imperial Law of Late Antiquity* (London, 1993), p. 145. See further M. R. Salzman, “‘Superstitio’ in the Codex Theodosianus and the Persecution of Pagans”, *Vigiliae Christianae*, xli (1987), pp. 172–88. For the sources, see K. Noethlichs, *Die gesetzgeberischen Massnahmen der christlichen Kaiser des vierten Jahrhunderts gegen Häretiker, Heiden und Juden* (Univ. of Cologne Dr phil. thesis, 1971).

⁵⁰ In his *Epistula xciii* (ed. Goldbacher, pp. 461–2; trans. Parsons, pp. 72–3). Here Augustine says that it was proof of the efficacy of coercion that changed his mind. Elsewhere he writes: “at this time, such coercion displeased me because I had not yet learned either how much evil their impunity would dare or to what extent the application of discipline could bring about their improvement”: Augustine, *Retractationes*, ii.5 (ch. 31) (*Sancti Aurelii Augustini Retractationum libri II*, ed. A. Mutzenbecher, C.S.E.L., lvii, Turnhout, 1984, pp. 93–4; *Retractations*, trans. M. Bogan, Fathers of the Church, lx, Washington, D.C., 1968, p. 129).

encouraged them to join the catholic church, which Eusebius says most proceeded to do.⁵¹

It was a pivotal decision, and not just for its comparison of deviant belief to disease — an analogy that would have a long and unfortunate influence on western thought. Constantine had used fiery rhetoric before, but here he followed up his language with force. Here, then, is an occasion when Constantine did conform to scholarly expectations about his role, and about the role of Christians and pagans in general. There is no reason to believe that the decision was an easy one for him to make. Earlier in his career, he had resisted use of force against the Donatists with language that, characteristically, invoked the eirenic model of Christian behaviour, telling the bishops in North Africa to leave vengeance to God, and to bear the indignities of Donatist violence with the grace of the martyrs. “What is it to triumph in this world in the name of God”, he asked, “other than to bear with steadfast heart when unruly assaults exasperate law-abiding citizens?” A decade later, he was still characterizing the use of force as the Devil’s work (*diaboli opera*) and urging the bishops of Numidia to respond by showing God’s own forbearance.⁵² It is difficult to see Constantine’s willingness to abandon such sentiments as a sign of spiritual growth.

Why did he do it? It was a traditional duty of the Roman emperor to maintain the “peace of the gods”, and Constantine may well have become frustrated by dissident provocations, just as Augustine was to be nearly a century later. In the edict

⁵¹ Eusebius, *De vita Constantini*, iii.66 (ed. Winkelmann, p. 119; trans. Richardson, p. 540), immediately following Constantine’s “Edict against the Heretics”, which Eusebius reproduces *ibid.*, iii.64–5 (ed. Winkelmann, pp. 117–19; trans. Richardson, p. 539). The law must have been issued before 25 September 326, the date of the passage in the *Theodosian Code* (xvi.5.2) in which Constantine exempts Novatians from its restrictions: *Theodosiani libri XVI cum constitutionibus Sirmondianis*, ed. Th. Mommsen and P. M. Mayer (Berlin, 1905), p. 855; *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, trans. C. Pharr (Corpus of Roman Law, i, Princeton, 1952), p. 450. Cf. Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World (31 B.C.–A.D. 337)* (Ithaca, 1977), p. 598. Wolfgang Liebeschuetz contrasts Constantine’s willingness to use coercion to suppress discord within the church with his more peaceful methods of encouraging conversion: Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion*, p. 296. Cf. Peter Garnsey’s comment that for Constantine, “heretics and schismatics were wicked and criminal, pagans merely in error”: Garnsey, “Religious Toleration in Classical Antiquity”, p. 19.

⁵² My translation. Constantine’s letters are part of a dossier compiled in the mid-fourth century by Bishop Optatus of Milevis. See *Le dossier du Donatisme*, ed. J.-L. Maier, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1987–9), i, pp. 239–42, 246–52; for the passages cited, see pp. 242, 249.

reproduced by Eusebius, he makes an ominous equation of the need to restore to the right path those who had previously lived “in the hope of future blessing”, on the one hand, and “that prosperity which we enjoy through the favor of God” on the other.⁵³ But it may also be noteworthy that the collection of heretics that Constantine addressed by name has a curiously archaic ring to it, and does not include the most troublesome of these deviant groups, the Donatists and the Arians. It is worth asking, therefore, whether Constantine might here, as elsewhere, have acted as much to satisfy a constituency as to deal with the problem. Even in his earlier letter on the Donatists, Constantine had mixed his spiritual message with practical reminders of the efforts he had taken to stamp out the sect. It is possible that, with the passage of years, the pressure to take some action that would confirm his claim to the loyalty of Christian militants intensified.

If such were the case, then it would mean that Constantine and his successors merely used attacks on heresy as a cheap means to promote their credentials with Christian constituents. It should again be stressed, however, that the duty to protect right worship was a traditional responsibility of the emperors, one that they took most seriously, as the waves of Christian persecution in preceding centuries testify. This would, therefore, be the field on which emperors would already be most inclined by the traditional duties of their office to deploy their powers. For the same reason, this would also be the area in which Christians newly brought under the imperial aegis would most readily expect a truly committed emperor to demonstrate his support for right belief. Put another way, it is the subject on which an emperor would be most vulnerable, and therefore most subject to pressure. The importance of heresy, thus, is that it was a perfect issue for coaxing emperors into a coercive posture.

Heresy is also the issue that mobilized the monks behind a message of coercion instead of love. The significance of this shift is easily underestimated. Pagan critics like Libanius and Eunapius provide vivid accounts of rampaging, black-robed mobs, and even the catholic emperor Theodosius is known to have remarked that “the monks commit many crimes”. Such comments, by themselves, encourage the conclusion that Christian coercion was

⁵³ Eusebius, *De vita Constantini*, iii.65 (ed. Winkelmann, p. 118; trans. Richardson, p. 539).

simply an exercise in brute force.⁵⁴ Although the potential for organized violence in these spiritual communities — whose inhabitants, by mid-century, are said to have numbered tens of thousands — should not be underestimated, exclusive attention to the role of violence begs an important question: what makes some acts of violence more permissible (or, from another perspective, harder to stop) than others? The difference surely lies in the extent to which a broader public perceives the violence as being used in a just cause. The enormous spiritual prestige these desert warriors enjoyed in the Christian community is thus a factor. By their more tedious and less visible regimen of self-denial, the monks had woven for themselves the mantle formerly worn by the martyrs, champions of Christian commitment and endurance during the long centuries of persecution. In a community that identified such behaviour with sanctity and holiness, the monks wielded a spiritual authority that turned what otherwise might have seemed senseless acts of violence into moral crusades. Under such conditions, reasonable voices are easily stilled. Christians who might otherwise have had doubts about the use of force would hesitate for ethical reasons, as much as for fear for their physical safety, to oppose methods sanctioned by these living icons.

Heresy, it may thus be argued, provided the first impetus for coercion. But if the pagan outsider is not the natural object of Christian intolerance, then a justification for turning this coercive force against pagans remains to be found. Intense as they were, the internal battles that are such a wearisome feature of the fourth century do not by themselves provide the answer. Rather, we need to find conditions that allowed extremists to convince mainstream Christians that there were some grounds to believe that pagans were a threat. For this to occur, there needed to be a trigger, a defining issue, something that would not just polarize Christians and pagans so as to remove the middle ground

⁵⁴ Libanius' complaints about the violence and gluttony of the monks are echoed by Eunapius: Libanius, *Oratio* xxx.9 (*Libanius: Selected Works*, ed. and trans. A. F. Norman, 2 vols. (Loeb Classical Library, ccccli-ccccli, Cambridge, Mass., 1969-77), ii, pp. 108-9); Eunapius, *Vitae sophistorum*, 472 (ed. and trans. Wright, pp. 422-3). For Theodosius, see Ambrose, *Epistula* xli.27: *Sancti Ambrosii opera*, x: *Epistulae extra collectionem*, ed. M. Zelzer, 3 pts (C.S.E.L., lxxxii, Vienna, 1982), iii, pp. 160-1; trans. H. de Romestin, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., ed. Schaff and Wace, x, p. 450. Roger Bagnall dismisses the figures given for the size of monastic communities in most accounts as "hugely impossible", but nevertheless recognizes that the numbers were large: R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), p. 301.

Constantine had created, but something that would also give substance to militant fears and thereby make those fears appear less paranoid, less the product of a fringe mentality than in more stable times they would seem. Despite long-standing assumptions to the contrary, it is increasingly clear that pagans in the mid-fourth century did not fit readily into this role. Under Constantine's skilful ministrations, a consensus had grown up in support of making public life neutral territory. As Constantine put it in a letter he sent to the principals in the burgeoning Arian controversy, the agreement was to maintain public harmony on the issue of divine providence, and leave differences regarding the identity and nature of that divinity to "the secret custody of your own minds and thoughts". More recent studies suggest that a trend had already begun in the third century to replace the sacrifices that had so long barred Christians from participating in public life by more neutral ways of celebrating traditional civic loyalties, such as games and shows.⁵⁵

Ironically, it would appear that the trigger was none other than the emperor whom that same scholarly tradition sees as the champion of a pagan revival, and reveres as the last great product of classical learning to sit on the throne: the apostate Julian. In the eighteen brief months that he ruled between 361 and 363, Julian did not persecute, as a hostile tradition contends. But he did make clear that the partnership between Rome and Christian bishops forged by Constantine and maintained, despite conflicts over goals, by his son Constantius II, was now at an end, replaced by a government that defined its interests and those of Christianity as antithetical. Julian flamboyantly revived blood-sacrifices, thereby ending the tacit agreement to avoid divisive actions in public ceremonies sealed under Constantine. These actions must certainly have revived Christian anxieties about the security of their relationship with the state. If tradition is correct, Athanasius — for once in his long, paranoid career — was not disturbed by "this fleeting cloud", a view reflected in many

⁵⁵ Constantine's letter to Arius and Alexander is found in Eusebius, *De vita Constantini*, ii.64-72 (ed. Winkermann, pp. 74-9; trans. Richardson, pp. 515-18); for the passage quoted, see ii.71 (ed. Winkermann, p. 78; trans. Richardson, p. 518). Regarding the move away from blood-sacrifices, see F. M. Young, "The Idea of Sacrifice in Neoplatonic and Patristic Texts", *Studia Patristica*, xi (1972), pp. 278-81; P. Athanassiadi, "Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus", *Jl Roman Studies*, lxxxiii (1993), pp. 115-30; S. Bradbury, "Julian's Pagan Revival and the Decline of Blood Sacrifice", *Phoenix*, xlix (1995), pp. 331-56.

standard treatments. But Athanasius' reaction was far from typical. As Robert Wilken has pointed out, Christians a quarter-century later were still terrorized by the name of the Apostate.⁵⁶ Julian's friend and supporter, the orator Libanius, conceded as much in arguing that such fears were groundless:

He tried to win them [i.e., those who did not follow his example] by persuasion and refused the use of force, but still the threat of fear hung over the corrupted, for they expected to be blinded or beheaded: rivers of blood would flow in massacres, they thought, and the new master would devise new-fangled tortures, the fire, sword, drowning, burial alive, hacking and mutilation seeming mere child's play. Such had been the behaviour of his predecessors and they expected his measures to be more severe still.⁵⁷

To understand the strength of this reaction, we must forget the future triumph of Christianity and remember, as Christians in 360 would have, Diocletian's great persecution at the beginning of the century. The significance of that persecution lay not just in its suddenness and the vehemence with which it was conducted, but also in the lengthy peace that preceded it — forty years of what must also have seemed like a permanent settlement in favour of peaceful coexistence. Part of Constantine's unrecognized genius lay in his skilful ministrations to these psychic scars in the collective Christian consciousness, nurturing bishops with flattery, making an elaborate show of deference to their councils and offering the practical benefits of public privileges and patronage resources to win Christians to the notion that the Roman state could indeed be trusted to care for their interests. Now, again after a prolonged period of benign treatment, another emperor arose who acted with undisguised hostility, in a manner that plausibly suggested to many that renewed persecution was imminent. What more logical for Christians, in the aftermath of Julian, than to believe that concrete steps needed to be taken to confirm an alliance that until then had been based mostly on assumptions of good faith?

⁵⁶ R. L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Berkeley, 1983), p. 128. An example of the reaction of Christian contemporaries is Gregory Nazianzen, *In Iulianum invectivae duae: Discours 4-5: Contre Julien*, ed. J. Bernardi (Sources chrétiennes, cccix, Paris, 1983); trans. C. W. King, *Julian the Emperor* (London, 1888), pp. 1-121. See also S. N. C. Lieu (ed.), *The Emperor Julian: Panegyric and Polemic* (Liverpool, 1986); S. H. Nulle, "Julian Redivivus", *Centennial Rev.*, v (1961), pp. 320-38; R. Braun and J. Richer (eds.), *L'Empereur Julien*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1978-81), i: *De l'histoire à la légende (331-1715)*.

⁵⁷ Libanius, *Oratio* xviii. 121 (ed. and trans. Norman, i, pp. 356-7).

In other words, the effect of Julian's actions was not to reinvigorate paganism, but to give renewed credibility to a policy identified with pagan extremism, a policy thought to have been thoroughly discredited — dead and buried. It does not matter that his intentions might have been honourable and his changes even warranted. In the latter half of the fourth century, efforts by a Roman emperor unilaterally to revise the Constantinian settlement inevitably aroused fears that pagan extremists might some day return to power. Julian thus personified just the kind of threat to the security of the Christian body that would weaken the consensus for toleration and give substance to arguments for militant action. As Garth Fowden has put it, Julian gave the Christians “what they had previously been obliged to invent for themselves — an incarnation of polytheism, a single target to shoot at”.⁵⁸ The effect was to mobilize Christian extremists by reviving doubts about the wisdom of trusting in a pagan alliance and generating, perhaps only unconsciously, a desire to consolidate power in a way that would prevent such a threat from arising again. When security becomes the primary issue, the Hypatias of this world fall all too readily victim.

If this reading is correct, then Julian's actions would also have neutralized the ability of recent converts to play the mediating role allotted them in modern scholarship. For however much these converts might have disagreed with the means employed, neither they nor any other moderate could speak against the goal of preventing a new pogrom without making the sincerity of their own beliefs suspect. Ironically, this analysis means that Julian was the trigger, not for a pagan offensive, but a Christian one. By giving substance to the fears of Christian extremists, he legitimated the militancy that increasingly characterized Christian-pagan relations thereafter.

At present, the effort to redefine the topic of Christian coercion yields more questions than answers. A complete explanation will need to account for the means by which militants use an external threat both to portray themselves as defenders of their group's core values and to remove political cover from those who might otherwise have been expected to advocate a more moderate position. Such answers as now suggest themselves must necessarily be tentative and incomplete. If, however, the suggestion that

⁵⁸ G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), p. 56.

Christian coercion did not result solely from a quality that is either inherent in or peculiar to Christianity has merit, then one certain conclusion is warranted. Whatever the conditions may be that allow coercive behaviour to prevail, they are ones to which every large, diverse organization — and not just Christianity — will be subject.

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