

RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY

The Problem of Christianization

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FACED BY A TOPIC as labyrinthine as the problem of Christianization, it is a relief to begin with a person for whom this problem apparently caused little trouble. Some time in fourth-century Britain, Annianus, son of Matutina, had a purse of six silver pieces stolen from him. He placed a leaden curse tablet in the sacred spring of Sulis Minerva at Bath, in order to bring the miscreant to the attention of the goddess. On this tablet, the traditional list of antithetical categories, that would constitute an exhaustive description of all possible suspects—‘whether man or woman, boy or girl, slave or free’—begins with a new antithesis: *seu gentilis seu christianus quaecumque*, ‘whether a gentile or a Christian, whomsoever.’ As Roger Tomlin, the alert editor of the tablets has observed:

it is tempting to think that a novel *gentilis/christianus* pair was added as a tribute to the universal power of Sulis.¹

Christianization, at the shrine of Sulis Minerva at Bath, meant knowledge of yet another world-wide category of persons whose deeds were open to the eye of an effective goddess of the post-Constantinian age.

Anianus, and many other fourth-century persons, lived in a universe rustling with the presence of many divine beings. In that universe, Christians, even the power of Christ and of His servants, the martyrs, had come to stay. But they appear in a perspective to which our modern eyes

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¹ R. S. O. Tomlin, ‘The Curse Tablets,’ *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath II*, ed. B. Cunliffe (Oxford, 1988), p. 233.

take some time to adjust—they are set in an ancient, pre-Christian spiritual landscape.

What has to be explained is why these hints of the infinitely diverse religious world of the fourth century remain what they are for any modern reader—tantalising fragments, glimpsed through the chinks of a body of evidence which claims to tell a very different story. It is this story to which we are accustomed. Put briefly: the notion that a relatively short period (from the conversion of Constantine, in 312, to the death of Theodosius II, in 450) witnessed the ‘end of paganism’; the concomitant notion that the end of paganism was the natural consequence of a long-prepared ‘triumph of monotheism’ in the Roman world; and the tendency to present the fourth century AD as a period overshadowed by the conflict between Christianity and paganism—all this amounts to a ‘representation’ of the religious history of the age that was first constructed by a brilliant generation of Christian historians, polemicists and preachers in the opening decades of the fifth century.² By means of this representation, Christian writers imposed (with seemingly irrevocable success, to judge by most modern accounts of the period) a firm narrative closure on what had been, in reality, in the well-chosen words of Pierre Chuvin, a ‘Wavering Century’.³

Yet, rather than regret this fact, we should look for a moment at why an articulate body of Christian opinion should have chosen to see the history of their own times in this particular manner. It provided for them a facilitating narrative. It was a narrative that held in suspense precisely what we would now call the ‘problem of Christianization.’

In the first place, we must remember the extent to which the conflict between Christianity and paganism was presented as having been fought out in heaven rather than on earth. The end of paganism occurred with the coming of Christ to earth. It was when He was raised on the Cross on Calvary—and not, as we more pedestrian historians tend to suppose, in the reign of Theodosius I—that heaven and earth rang with the crash of falling temples.⁴ The alliance of the Christian church with Christian emperors, to abolish sacrifice and to close and destroy the temples, was no more than a last, brisk mopping up operation, that made manifest on earth a victory already won, centuries before, by Christ, over the shadowy empire of the demons.

² F. Thélamon, *Paiens et chrétiens au ive siècle. L'apport de l' 'Histoire Ecclésiastique' de Rufin d'Aquilée* (Paris, 1981) is a model study of one such author.

³ P. Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990): the title of the third chapter.

⁴ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols* 180, transl. S. Landersdorfer, *Ausgewählte Schriften der syrischen Dichter* (Munich, 1913), p. 416.

It was, indeed, the starkly supernatural quality of this narrative that made it so useful to contemporaries. It suspended the sense of time. Not only was the triumph of Christ pre-ordained: each manifestation of it was instantaneous. As a result, the immediate human consequences of that victory could be taken for granted. The gods were thought to have passed away from whole regions much as, in the Christian rite of exorcism, the demon was believed to have passed out of the body of the possessed in a single, dramatic spasm, that left the sufferer free to return, immediately, to normal health of mind and body. Narratives of the end of paganism—such as the dramatic destruction of the Serapeum of Alexandria in around 392—follow an analogous, brisk rhythm.⁵ It was enough that Serapis should be seen to have been driven from the shrine that he had ‘possessed’ for so many centuries, by the power of Christ, made palpable by the successful violence of His servants. It was assumed that Alexandria had been ‘healed’ by the passing of its greatest god, and could henceforth be treated as a Christian city.

More important still, such an otherworldly narrative even enabled the devotees of the old gods to accept what was, often, a brutal *fait accompli*. The worshippers of Serapis declared that, in a manner characteristic of the gods of Egypt, their god had simply withdrawn to heaven, saddened that so much blasphemy should happen in his favoured city.⁶ The end of sacrifice and the closing of the temples merely reflected on earth the outcome of a conflict of mighty invisible beings. The acclaimed triumph of the one and the lordly withdrawal of the other had to be accepted by mere mortals. No further questions needed to be asked, and life could resume as usual in a murmurous city. Even the defeated had been given a slender imaginative basis for accommodation to the new regime, much as the solemn, public *psychodrame* of the *damnatio memoriae* of usurpers both declared the notional, eternal victory of the rightful emperor, and, so it was hoped, brought to a merciful close the potentially murderous lacerations of civil war.

It is, however, in its modern, laicized form that the fifth-century Christian ‘representation’ of their times has come to influence our approach to the problem of Christianization. As a result of a body of late antique Christian evidence largely intended to give a satisfying sense of narrative pace and direction to the progressive triumph of the Church, the process of Christianization tends to be seen largely in terms of the impact of a

⁵ Thélamon, *Paiens et chrétiens*, p. 252.

⁶ Chuvin, *Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, pp. 67–68.

formidable moving body upon the inert and static mass of ancient paganism.⁷

We are like little boys on the sea-shore. We watch with fascinated delight as the tide sweeps in upon an intricate sandcastle. We note when each segment crumbles before the advancing waters. Some parts fall quickly. They have well-known dates: 384, for the controversy on the removal of the Altar of Victory from the Roman Senate-house; 392 (perhaps) for the destruction of the Serapeum; 529 for the closing of the Academy at Athens. Others provoke a sigh only in the erudite: on 24 August 394, for instance, we say good-bye to our last Egyptian hieroglyph.⁸ Nothing thrills us more than to find parts that had escaped the oncoming tide. We experience an understandable moment of vertigo when Carlo Ginzburg tells us, in his *Storia notturna*, about the old ladies of the Val di Fassa, who informed none other than Nicholas Cusanus, at Bressanone in 1457, that they had touched the shaggy, bear-paw hands of *La Richella*, ‘the mother of all wealth and good fortune’—a Braurian Artemis (for Ginzburg, at least) still ministering to the mountain villages of the Alps.⁹

Altogether, we tend to approach the problem of Christianization as a matter of charting the impact of Christian belief and practise on the whole range of late antique religion and society. We tend to ask ‘What difference did Christianity make?’¹⁰ Unlike our fifth-century predecessors, of course, we do not have the same high expectations of success. The lie of the land of an ancient Mediterranean society makes it unlikely that all but the most exposed and seaward parts of the sandcastle should fall. We assume that the unthinking mass of *hommes moyens sensuels* could never have been deeply affected by the icy tide of a doctrinaire Christianity—by its shrill ascetic denunciations of sexual pleasure, much less by its Utopian utterances on wealth, slavery and warfare—whose spluttering foam fills so many volumes of the *Patrologia*, as Christian preaching swashed ineffectually around the solid high ground of Roman *mores*. Christianization, if it happened at all, must be a slow process, doomed to incompleteness. As Robin Lane Fox has warned us, in the opening pages of his vivid book, *Pagans and Christians*—the brilliant reign of Constantine

⁷ J. Geffcken, *The Last Days of Greco-Roman Paganism*, transl. Sabine MacCormack (Amsterdam, 1978) and R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, Conn., 1984) provide fully documented overviews, as do the classic essays in *The Conflict of Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century A.D.*, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford, 1963).

⁸ Thélamon, *Paiens et chrétiens*, p. 227; see now E. Wipszycka, ‘La Christianisation de l’Égypte au ive – ve siècles,’ *Aegyptus* 68 (1988), pp. 117–164.

⁹ Carlo Ginzburg, *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba* (Turin, 1989), pp. 70–88; English transl. *Ecstasies* (New York, 1991), pp. 94–110.

¹⁰ R. MacMullen, ‘What Difference did Christianity Make?,’ *Historia* 35 (1986), pp. 322–343, now in *Changes in the Roman Empire* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1990), pp. 142–155.

was only a landmark in the history of Christianisation, that state which is always receding, like full employment or a garden without weeds.¹¹

(And from a learned colleague, who is also gardening correspondent of the *Financial Times*, these are sobering words indeed).

I would like to step aside from this way of looking at the problem of Christianization. Instead, I will turn, first, to the heavens—to evoke a deeply-rooted collective representation of the universe, which gave late antique persons the intellectual and imaginative tools with which to grapple with the ambiguous religious situation of their age. Second, I will return firmly to earth—to suggest that this particular representation owed its tenacity, in the fourth and early fifth centuries, in large part to the manner in which it lent cosmic validation to the rapid and, for a time, at least, self-confident, emergence of a new style of imperial rule and a new *ethos* of upper class life. Third, to conclude—I will sketch the manner in which a crisis of confidence in the imperial system, which became increasingly apparent in the Western empire of the late fourth century, was compounded by a regrouping of Christian opinion, in such a way as to lead to the emergence of an alternative representation of the process of Christianization to the one we described at the beginning of this lecture. Through the works of Saint Augustine, its more sombre, less vibrantly triumphant and supernatural tones would come to exercise a profound influence on the manner in which Western Christians would look back upon the triumph of the Church in the Roman world.

Let us first look up to the heavens. We must remember that it is not easy to do so. Living as we do in a bleakly sub-monotheistic age, we tend to look up into the sky and to find it empty. We no longer see there a *mundus*, a physical universe as heavy as a swollen cloud (for good or ill) with the presence of invisible beings. Belief in an everlasting universe, at once inhabited and governed by intertwined hierarchies of divine beings and their ethereal ministers, was an article of faith for most late classical persons.¹² It had been put at risk by the rise of Christian doctrines on the Creation and the end of the world.

vigentem . . . aeternitate sua mundum velut temporarium brevemque despiciunt.
The *mundus*, the visible universe, pulsing with the energy of life eternal, they despise, as time-bound and of brief duration.¹³

It is this collective representation of the divine world that we must first install in the back of our minds when we read the late antique evidence.

¹¹ R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1987), p. 21.

¹² A. J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste II: Le Dieu cosmique* (Paris, 1949), p. 343.

¹³ *Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii* I.1, ed. G. Morin (Bonn, 1935), p. 8.

If we do not do so, this evidence will appear to us as crisp and as clear-cut, but as unreal, as a lunar landscape from which the subtle shades imparted by an atmosphere have been drained. Of all the collective representations that had to move, through the slow redrawing of the map of the divine world at the behest of Christian theologians and preachers, the ancient representation of the *mundus* was the one which shifted with the slowness of a glacier.

Contemporaries tended to stress, in practise, the supernatural compartmentation of the universe at the expense of its notional unity. The highest divine power was thought to inhabit its shining upper reaches, far beyond the solid brilliance of the stars. Human beings, placed on an earth that lay 'in the sump-hole of the universe,'¹⁴ enjoyed the benevolence of that high power largely through a host of lower spirits, who brushed the earth with their ministrations. An imaginative structure of such ancient majesty and self-evident truth constituted the religious common sense of large numbers of fourth-century persons. It was a common-sense shared by Christians. Listen to Saint Augustine preaching in Carthage:

There are those who say: 'God is good, He is great, supreme, eternal and inviolable. It is He who will give us eternal life and that incorruption which He promised at the resurrection. But these things of the physical world and of our present time—*ista vero saecularia et temporalia*—belong to the *daemones* and to the invisible Powers.' . . .

They leave aside God, as if these things did not belong to Him; and by sacrifices, by all kinds of healing devices, and by the expert counsel of their fellows . . . they seek out ways to cope with what concerns this present life.¹⁵

It was further assumed that the favoured servants of the One High God were those best informed, also, about the turbulent lower reaches of the *mundus*. They could be trusted to give advice on how to achieve health and happiness in this world. In the 420s, Shenoute of Atripe observed that a provincial governor, 'a man with a reputation for being wise,' had taken to wearing a jackal's claw tied to his right toe. The governor informed him that he did this on the recommendation 'of a certain Great Monk.'¹⁶ A leading Christian ascetic had validated what appeared to Shenoute to be a blatantly non-Christian occult remedy.

Shenoute's reaction is interesting. Faced by the thoughtful governor, he did not think to deny the existence of a universe sharply divided between upper and lower powers. He countered, rather, with an exaltation of the power of Christ, as the one being Who was uniquely able to bridge

¹⁴ Augustine, *Sermo* 18.1.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Enarratio I in Ps.* 34, 7.

¹⁶ Shenoute, *Contra Origenistas*, 256–257, ed. Tito Orlandi (Rome, 1985), pp. 18–19.

the imaginative fissure that ran across the universe, separating its highest from its lowest reaches. The power of Christ was able to reach down to touch all aspects of daily life in the material world.

Try to attain to the full measure of this Name,
and you will find it on your mouth and on the
mouths of your children. When you make high
festival and when you rejoice, cry Jesus.
When anxious and in pain, cry Jesus. When
little boys and girls are laughing, let them
cry Jesus. And those who flee before barbarians,
cry Jesus. And those who go down to the Nile, cry
Jesus. And those who see wild beasts and sights of
terror, cry Jesus. Those who are taken off to
prison, cry Jesus. And those whose trial has been
corrupted and who receive injustice, cry the Name
of Jesus.¹⁷

For men such as Augustine and Shenoute, in the opening decades of the fifth century, the ‘Christianization’ that mattered most was the imaginative Christianization of the *mundus*—the consequential assertion of its unity, as subject to the exclusive power of the One God, revealed to the world through Jesus Christ, in the face of an ancient, more compartmentalized model, that had tended to explain, and, hence, to excuse, the observed diversity of religious practise on earth. It meant nothing less than the creation of a religious common sense about the actions of the divine and the nature of the universe different from that held by the ‘cognitive majority’ of their fellows.

This is a weighty matter, and in order to approach it we must return from heaven to earth—more precisely, to the age of Constantine and his successors, to the fourth century Roman empire, before the changes that marked its last decades.

When we turn to the public culture of the fourth century, we are faced by a series of apparent disjunctions that force us to re-think what we mean by ‘Christianization’ in this period. The situation is as follows. In the fourth century AD, there were many well-placed inhabitants of the restored Roman empire who would have agreed with Professor Clifford Geertz, that

At the political center of any complexly organized society . . . there is both a governing elite and a set of symbolic forms expressing the fact that it is in truth governing.¹⁸

¹⁷ Shenoute, *Contra Origenistas*, 821, ed. Orlandi, pp. 62–63.

¹⁸ C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York, 1983), p. 124.

Yet a glance at the art and secular culture of the later empire makes one fact abundantly clear: when the 'governing elite' of this officially Christian empire presented themselves to themselves and to the world at large, as being 'in truth governing', the 'set of symbolic forms' by which they expressed this fact owed little or nothing to Christianity.

The array of symbolic forms by which the *potentes* of the later empire showed their dominance was impressive. Hauntingly post-classical mosaics adorned their villas.¹⁹ Exuberant adaptations of old rituals celebrated their power and prosperity.²⁰ An elaboration of ceremonial characterized the imperial court.²¹ Styles of poetry, of letter-writing and of rhetoric flourished, with which to express the solidarity of the governing class and to act as emblems of their authority.²² The drastic rearrangement of so many classical traditions in order to create a whole new heraldry of power was one of the greatest achievements of the late Roman period. Yet, it would be profoundly misleading to claim that changes in this large area of social and cultural life reflected in any way a process of 'Christianization.' What matters, in fact, is the exact opposite. We are witnessing the vigorous flowering of a public culture that Christians and non-Christians alike could share.

The distinctive flavour of fourth century upper-class life is shown most vividly in its artefacts. Take the *de luxe* manuscript of a *Calendar* presented in 354 to a well-to-do person, Valentinus. It was prepared by an artist who later worked for pope Damasus and may even have executed commissions for the elder Melania²³—that formidable ascetic lady, pilgrim to the Holy Land and patroness of Saint Jerome's youthful friend, Rufinus. It bore an acceptable, post-Constantinian acclamation, *Floreas in Deo*; and it contained a list of the festivals of the Roman church, and the commemorative dates for the burials of leading popes. Yet the illustrated sections of the *Calendar* consist of lovingly circumstantial representations of those rites of the Roman public cult associated with each month. In the words of the title of Michele Salzman's new book on the *Calendar of 354*, Valentinus, the Christian aristocrat, was still a man who lived *On Roman Time*.²⁴

¹⁹ L. Schneider, *Die Domäne als Weltbild. Wirkungsstrukturen der spätantiken Bildersprache* (Wiesbaden, 1983).

²⁰ M. Meslin, *La fête des Kalendes de janvier dans l'empire romain* (Brussels, 1970).

²¹ S. G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, California, 1981); Averil Cameron, 'The construction of court ritual: the Byzantine *Book of Ceremonies*,' *Rituals of Royalty. Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, ed. David Cannadine and Simon Price (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 106–136.

²² Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire. The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley, California, 1991), pp. 47–88.

²³ Alan Cameron, 'Filocalus and Melania,' *Classical Philology* 87 (1992), pp. 140–144.

²⁴ M. Salzman, *On Roman Time. The Codex-Calendar of 354* (Berkeley, California, 1990).

Yet it would be misleading to ask which part of the *Calendar* was 'real' and which an empty shell, maintained only by unthinking tradition. The more we look at such art, the more we are impressed by the way in which the parts that we tend to keep in separate compartments, by labelling them 'classical,' even 'pagan,' as distinct from 'Christian,' form a coherent whole: they sidle up to each other, under the subterranean attraction of deep homologies.²⁵ The classical and Christian elements are not simply incompatible, nor can their relative degree of presence or absence be taken as an indicator of a process of Christianization—by which standard, Valentinus, the Roman, would, perhaps, be deemed to have barely made it to the half-way post. Rather, the classical elements have been re-deployed. They are often grouped in such a way as to convey, if anything, an even heavier charge of meaning. The gods make their appearance, now, as imposing emblems of power and prosperity. Their haunting sensuousness, the quiet majesty that their presence imparts to scenes of abundance and repose, their post-classical, pudgy playfulness bring down a touch of the opulence of a *mundus*, whose lower reaches, peopled still by the guardians of earthly things—of victory, of love, of the fruits of the earth—had not yet paled beneath the presence of the One God. They added a numinous third dimension to the solidity of a *saeculum* restored to order by Constantine and his successors.²⁶

It is not enough to say of these representations, as Hegel later did of the statues of the gods in modern times, *unser Knie beugen wir doch nicht mehr*, 'but we no longer bend the knee.'²⁷ For, in the fourth century, such figures appeared precisely in those places where men did bend the knee—if not to the ancient gods, at least to other men, to the emperor and to the powerful, for whom *adoratio*, full-blooded reverence, was deemed an utterly appropriate gesture.²⁸

Even the symbols of the new, Christian dispensation—the Christogram, the *labarum*, a little later, exquisite ornamental crosses—appear in places allotted to them by the common celebration of the *reparatio saeculi*, the *felicitas saeculi*, of a world restored and at ease, despite potential chaos. They appear on almost any significant or prestigious object connected

²⁵ Kathleen Shelton, 'Roman Aristocrats, Christian Commissions: The Carrand Diptych,' *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*, ed. F. M. Clover and R. S. Humphreys (Madison, Wisc., 1989), pp. 105–127.

²⁶ Schneider, *Domäne als Weltbild*, p. 134; J. G. Deckers, 'Dionysos der Erlöser?' *Römische Quartalschrift* 81 (1986), pp. 145–172.

²⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetik* I.1, *Werke* 10.1 (Berlin, 1835), p. 135.

²⁸ On attitudes to the adoration of imperial images, see *Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii* I.28, ed. Morin, pp. 34–35, with the commentary of J.-L. Feiertag, *Les Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii* (Fribourg-en-Suisse, 1990), pp. 68–97.

with the new elites—on milestones, on mosaic pavements, on sets of luxury cutlery, even, indeed, on the iron dog-collar of a slave, with the inscription,

Arrest me, for I have run away, and bring me back to the Mons Caelius, to the palace of Elpidius, *vir clarissimus*.²⁹

The mysterious—and now notorious—hoard of silverware known as the Sevso Treasure makes this plain. Here we meet a beneficiary of the Christian empire—a provincial aristocrat, maybe a military man of non-Roman origin—who lived well, hunting with his favourite horse, Innocentius, and feeding on the delicious freshwater fish unique to Lake Balaton. Sevso was there to stay: in the words of the inscription placed around the hunting scene on his main serving plate—a mere 18 pounds of solid silver,

May these, O Sevso, yours for many ages be,
Small vessels fit to serve your offspring worthily.³⁰

Christianity, also, was there to stay: the *labarum* appears at the beginning of the inscription, directly above the central figure, as he reclines at his ease in the huntsmen's banquet. Like the little scenes of the emperors sacrificing to the gods, that were once turned out from cake-moulds, associated with public banquets in second-century Britain and Pannonia, the *labarum* now made formidably familiar, in the same province, the supernatural power under whose distant protection the *saeculum* had, for a moment, become, for an influential group of persons such as Sevso, a surprisingly comfortable place.³¹

The ancient collective representation of the *mundus* gave to such people—to Christians quite as much as to pagans—imaginative room for manoeuvre. Its many layers reconciled faith in the One, High God with dogged, indeed, reverential concern for the things of the *saeculum*, that had once been ascribed, more frankly, to the care of the ancient gods. Whenever we meet groups involved in mobilizing the 'set of symbolic forms' that expressed the unbroken will to rule of the Roman Empire, in its major cities and most stable regions, we find ceremonials which, though not 'pagan' in the strict sense (in that blood-sacrifice was pointedly avoided) nevertheless aimed to sink the Roman order into the refulgent stability of the heavens, thereby making of the Roman *saeculum* on earth

²⁹ H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* 8730 (Berlin, 1892), vol. III, p. 983.

³⁰ M. Mundell, 'The Sevso Treasure Hunting Plate,' *Apollo*, July 1990, pp. 2–11 and 65–67.

³¹ Richard Gordon, 'The Veil of Power: Emperors, Sacrificers and Benefactors,' *Pagan Priests*, ed. M. Beard and J. North (Ithaca, New York, 1990), pp. 217–219.

an image of that high region of the *mundus*, through which the magical energies of eternity pulsed with palpable splendour.³²

We know how long such ceremonies survived in the Hippodrome and in the Imperial Palace of Constantinople, as the eastern empire settled down, after 395, to enjoy a *pax byzantina*, an east Roman peace as miraculously prolonged, in the eastern provinces, as any enjoyed in the Antonine age.³³ But it comes as a surprise to learn that, in the West, in the 440s, in an anxious age, overshadowed by the empire of Attila, the most Catholic princes of Ravenna would still take part in the great New Year's festival of the Kalends of January. On that occasion, the glory of the *saeculum* was made manifest, in the procession that accompanied the nomination of the consuls of the year. The *tota officina idolorum*, the majestic décor of the ancient gods, was mobilized to relive a moment of cosmic euphoria. Men dressed as the mighty planets (in fact, as the gods of Rome) swirled solemnly through the Hippodrome of Ravenna, bringing to earth the promise of renewal, in yet another effulgence of the eternal energy of Rome.³⁴

But we know of this occasion not, as we would, in Byzantium, from a *Book of Ceremonies*, religiously preserved by the imperial court, but from the shocked comment of the then Catholic bishop of Ravenna, Petrus Chrysologus:

sacrilegio vetusto anni novitas consecratur. The new birth of the year is blessed by outworn sacrilege.³⁵

His remarks remind us that a new, sharp breeze had risen in the West. It had, indeed, blown for over a generation. For many Christians, such as Petrus Chrysologus, it seemed as if Christianization, far from participating unproblematically in the euphoria of a world restored, associated with the Constantinian empire, had only just begun. It is to this change of mood that we must turn.

The change is as elusive in its onset, but as unmistakable, as a change of pitch in the hum of an engine. It is easier to describe than to explain. But I have been emboldened to linger upon it by a recent masterpiece of lucid and deeply-pondered historical judgement, by Robert Markus' *The*

³² *de circensibus*, Codex Salmasianus 197, ed. *Anthologia Latina* I (Leipzig, 1964), p. 161; Ausonius, *Carm.* II.5—on the Kalends.

³³ Y.-M. Duval, 'Des Lupercales de Constantinople aux Lupercales de Rome,' *Revue des études latines* 55 (1977), pp. 222–270, at pp. 236–241.

³⁴ Meslin, *La fête des Kalendes de janvier*, pp. 51–93.

³⁵ Petrus Chrysologus, *Sermo* 155bis, 1, ed. A. Olivar, *Corpus Christianorum* 24B (Turnhout, 1975), p. 967.

End of Ancient Christianity.³⁶ What follows involves a working-through, from my own perspective, of one of his most felicitous contentions—that a history of Christianization in late antiquity and in the early middle ages must begin with close attention to what Christians themselves considered to be ‘Christianization.’ It must involve entering into what constituted their own measure of success. It must respect the imaginative horizons within which late Roman Christians thought that they could act. In the late fourth-century West, in the age of Ambrose and Augustine, these imaginative horizons shifted; and this change was exploited by an articulate and influential group of Christians.

In the first place, due to the renewal of civil wars and the consequent weakening of crucial frontiers that followed the battle of Adrianople, in 378, the *saeculum* itself came to seem less secure. Put bluntly: Sevso’s Pannonia, to take only one instance, became a far from happy place. The previous consensus that had been fostered by what I am tempted to call the First Christian Empire had depended on a shared prosperity that no longer existed.

This is a somewhat external and inevitably hypothetical consideration. What we do know is that, in many regions and strata of society, Christianity itself had changed. It is important to remember, in this respect, that the breakdown of religious prejudice does not always augur well for the cause of religious tolerance. Clear-cut enmities and firm codes of avoidance, based on a sharp sense of pollution, can have the effect of protecting religious groups from each other. It gives them room to back off. Constantine and his successors had been vehement in not wishing to be seen near a sacrificial altar.³⁷ In Africa, the Donatist church had based its claim to a monopoly of holiness on a similar sense of revulsion: its founding fathers had avoided the stench of altars at the time of the Great Persecution.³⁸ In around 400, Publicola, a landowner with estates in Africa—possibly Valerius Publicola, the son of Melania the elder—deluged Augustine with a series of questions, all of which turned on issues of pollution and avoidance, faced by Christian peasants and estate-managers in a largely pagan countryside.³⁹ Augustine considered these questions fussy and misplaced. Yet they reveal very clearly the horizons of the possible within which average well-to-do Christians viewed their world. A

³⁶ Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 1–17.

³⁷ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* II.29—on Constantine’s abusive refusal to take part in the procession to the Capitol; when serving under Julian the Apostate, the future emperor Valentinian I was believed to have cut off that part of his cloak on which drops of pagan lustral water had been sprinkled: Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI.6.

³⁸ Augustine, *Enarr. II in Ps. 88*, 14.

³⁹ Augustine, *Epp.* 46 and 47.

strong sense of pollution, focused on the act of pagan sacrifice, was framed in such a way as to imply that paganism lay outside their own community and that it was there to stay.

Such codes of avoidance were further validated by the highly compartmentalized view of the *mundus* to which we have referred. Given the rigid division between a High God and the lower powers, it was not surprising that many persons should continue to seek protection from the lower powers. Christians might claim to know better: they would avoid 'the ceremonies of a bye-gone superstition' (to use the blunt words of Constantine).⁴⁰ But they retained a healthy respect for their efficacy. Later Byzantine Christians, to take only one example, remained convinced that whole cities could be protected from earthquake by talismans devised by wise philosophers, such as Apollonius of Tyana, who knew how to placate and hold at bay the uncanny forces of the lower air.⁴¹ Such Christians did not feel polluted in the eyes of God by the fact that pagan rites continued to exist. It was sufficient that they themselves should remain clean. The attitude was summed up in the ruling of the pre-Constantinian Council of Elvira: landowners who feared the violence of their slaves would not be held guilty for having failed to forbid sacrifices. It was enough that they should not participate in them.⁴² Apart from that, their religious universe gave them every reason for doing very little about the beliefs and practises of their non-Christian neighbours.

On this topic, we may be confronted with a development as imperceptible as a generational change. Bishops, such as Ambrose of Milan, are usually treated as having been the decisive figures in late fourth-century Christianity: they are held to have bullied the laity, from the emperors downwards, into a less tolerant mood.⁴³ But the clergy may have sensed that the horizons of the possible had begun to change, also, for a new generation of lay Christians. They could be expected to do more. Ancient checks and balances had begun to move in the back of their minds. More ambitious, hence more aggressive, attitudes were free to emerge.

When we turn to Saint Augustine—and especially to the sermons that he preached in Carthage, in 397 and, again, in 401 AD (at a time of intense excitement, brought about by the imperial decision to close the temples in the city and throughout Africa)—we can see what this change of mood could mean for future generations. The significance of these sermons has

⁴⁰ *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.2.

⁴¹ Anastasius Sinaita, *Quaestiones* 20, *Patrologia Graeca* 89: 524–525.

⁴² Council of Elvira, canon 41, ed. E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt* (Leiden, 1974), p. 14.

⁴³ It is to be hoped that Neil McLynn, *Ambrose* (Berkeley, California, forthcoming) will soon present us with a very different Ambrose from the image now current.

been clearly seen by Robert Markus, in his *End of Ancient Christianity*.⁴⁴ Let me conclude, therefore, by lingering a little on the implications of Augustine's attitude, as seen against the background that I have sketched out for previous generations.

Like Shenoute, his younger contemporary in Egypt, Augustine proposed to his congregation a passionate monotheism, that cuts through the lower layers of the *mundus*. *Salus tua ego sum* is the cry of the heart to a unique and ever-present God.

Si ad aeterna, quare non ad temporalia? If relevant to eternity, why not to the present time?⁴⁵

And, imperceptibly, all Carthage has become his church. For when Augustine rejected the Donatist claim that the holiness of the Church was based on the avoidance of the pollution associated with essentially external, pagan rites, he burst the dam that held back the waters of a stern Catholic moralism from sweeping down upon the city as a whole. This torrent would destroy not only identifiable pagan practises, such as the abhorrent rite of sacrifice. It threatened to drag in its wake, also, a sizeable area of the profane ceremonial life of Carthage, a proud city, whose inhabitants, pagan and Christian alike, still expected to celebrate the security of the *saeculum* through ceremonies such as we have described, performed, in this case, in honour of the statue of the *genius* of Carthage—a majestic figure, carrying the abundant fruits of Africa in her arms, as befitted the capital of the breadbasket of Rome.⁴⁶

Augustine would no longer allow this. Behaviour deemed inappropriate in a Christian came to include more than participating in pagan rites, around the smoking altars. The songs, dances and banquets associated with civic life were condemned. Their solemn, public character was denied. Their diffuse religiosity was bleakly demystified. Public ceremonies were caricatured by being spoken of, only, in moral terms, as no more than so many occasions for debauchery.⁴⁷ New codes of Christian decorum were proposed. Even terms of speech, such as the continued use of the names of the gods for the days of the week, were deemed unsuitable. It was better to pick up the habit of the *ecclesiasticus ritus*, of a Catholic usage, that spoke of *prima feria, secunda feria*.⁴⁸ by which high standards only

⁴⁴ Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, pp. 107–123.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Enarr. I in Ps. 34*, 7.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Sermo* 62.6.10; see F. M. Clover, 'Felix Karthago,' *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*, pp. 129–162.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Sermo* 198.3.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. 93*, 3.

Portugal, among Western Catholic nations, should be considered fully Christianized!

The wayward soul could sacrifice to the deceiving powers in innumerable ways, without approaching an altar. It was a long list that Augustine proposed. It embraced civic celebrations judged innocent by Christians of an earlier generation. It ends with a crushing *quasi*:

Those who do these things, *it is as if* they offered
to the demons incense taken from their very heart.⁴⁹

Last but not least, it is in these years that Augustine, the sombre theorist of the force of habit in human affairs, added the final touch of shade to what has become the modern, Western representation of the process of Christianization. For at the same time that he spoke for his colleagues, the bishops of Africa, in urging an ambitious programme, that claimed every city in its entirety for the Catholic Church alone, Augustine offered them what they needed to maintain such an enterprise—he provided a cogent explanation in the event of failure.

In so doing, he created the notion of Christianization with which we ourselves still live. In the early fifth century, Christian critics conjured up a ‘representation’ of their own times, that was the dark counterpoint to the triumphant narrative that circulated in other circles—the narrative of supernatural victory over the gods with which we began this lecture. A myth of the ‘decline of the Church’ began to circulate, especially in Latin ascetic circles. The Church was no longer thought of as undermined by the demons, through heresy and abuse of power among its leaders. Decline had taken place for more prosaic reasons. Success had ‘cooled’ the zeal of the original Christian communities.⁵⁰ Christian worship itself was tainted by the sheer weight of new adherents. In fact, any practise of which a group of self-styled *districtiores Christiani*, of ‘more rigorous Christians’ (largely, but not exclusively, clergymen of ascetic temperament)⁵¹ happened to disapprove was now confidently ascribed to habits brought into the Church by recent converts from paganism. The Church may have defeated the gods; but it had not defeated, in its own congregations, the towering force of religious habits taken directly from the non-Christian past.

In 392, Augustine was faced, as a priest at Hippo, by a delegation of old-style Catholics, who regarded their exuberant funerary customs and their association of feasting with the celebration of the cult of the martyrs

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Sermo* 198.3, see now F. Dolbeau, *Rech. august.* 26 (1992), pp. 69–41.

⁵⁰ John Cassian, *Collationes* 18.5.23; Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicon* II.32; Jerome, *Vita Malchi* 1; Isidore of Pelusium, *Epp.* II.54 and 246, with Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, pp. 166–167.

⁵¹ *Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii*, I.28, ed. Morin, p. 35.

—with good reason—as wholly Christian traditions, to which they had been accustomed for generations. He gave them a historical explanation of the situation in which they found themselves. After the conversion of Constantine, he said, ‘crowds of the heathen’ had wished to enter the Church. They could not bear to give up the ‘revelling and drunkenness with which they had been accustomed to celebrate the feasts of the idols.’ A soft-hearted (or opportunistic) clergy had let them in. Hence the practise. Hence Augustine’s decision to abolish it.⁵²

From that time onwards, such a view tends to be taken for granted, as a common-sense glimpse of the obvious. Untouched, today, by the sense of tragedy that stirred those who first propounded it, we tend to agree with Augustine’s diagnosis. Yet what was at stake was less clear-cut than Augustine made it appear to be. It was largely an issue of authority. Augustine and his clerical colleagues claimed to be able to tell the Christian laity exactly what paganism had been and how much of it survived in their own religious practises within the Church.

This claim involved nothing less than a subtle ‘historicisation,’ even a ‘laicisation’ of paganism. The end of paganism is caught in normal time—it is mired in the slow and erratic processes observed, by Augustine and similar moralists, in the healing of any other bad habit. The idea of the supernatural triumph of Christ over the kingdom of the demons remained; but it was joined by another theme. For pagan worship itself was not an exclusively supernatural matter. The power of the demons was less clearly focused. It showed itself not only in sacrifice, but in centuries of misdirected habit, that had affected all aspects of ancient life. While pagan worship might be abolished, the past remained a pagan place. Those who entered the Church brought with them the shadow of an untranscended, ancient way of life. *Antiquitas*, ‘antiquity, mother of all evils’ was the last enemy of all true Christians.⁵³

Within such a perspective, the Christian believer was no longer presented, in largely supernatural terms, as poised between sin and salvation, between the pollution of idols and an instant freedom from the demonic, brought about by the vibrant power of Christ. The believer is poised, also, between two cultures, even between two historical epochs—between the growing Christian culture of the Catholic church, with its own theology and its own, distinctive habits of speech and worship, and a profane world whose roots reached back in time into the rich soil of a past once ruled by the *dei bugiardi*. It was a past whose darkened majesty was

⁵² Augustine, *Epp.* 29.8–9.

⁵³ *Sermo de saltationibus respuendis, Patrologia Latina: Supplementum 4: 974.*

conjured up with memorable circumstantiality, for all future Latin readers, in the pages of Augustine's *City of God*.

These views were not only stated by Augustine. They characterize a generation of mainly Latin writers. But they were not universal. The Christian historians who propounded the 'representation' of the fourth century with which we began this lecture, looked back, rather, to Eusebius of Caesarea—to a very different version of the history of the human race from that proposed by Augustine. Greek writers of the fifth century AD, such as the historian and apologist, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, lingered, by preference, on the excitements of a great *metabolé*.⁵⁴ They chose to celebrate a mighty transmutation, by which the non-Christian past flowed into a triumphant Christian present. It amounted to a declaration of total victory, that left much of the past untouched. Even the statues of Livia and Augustus outside the Prytaneion of Ephesus would continue to stand throughout this period. With the sign of the Cross neatly carved on their foreheads, they gazed down serenely on the prelates assembled by the emperor Augustus' orthodox successor, Theodosius II, to the great Council of 431.

Yet, in the Western parts of the empire, the basic narrative of Christianization, with which we moderns are most familiar, had been created. It is some indication of the distance between ourselves and late Roman persons that this particular narrative was not the one that counted for most at that time. One suspects that Christianization still meant, for the majority of fourth and fifth century Christians, the story of a stunning, supernatural victory over the gods. The alternative story, offered by the critics of their own age, however, lends itself more readily to a historian's saddened sense of the possible. We take for granted that Christianization must have been a slow, heroic struggle on earth against the unyielding, protean weight of an unconverted ancient world. Thanks largely to the writings of the generation of Augustine, a charged memory of the Roman past now lingers in the imagination of all Westerners as a potent fragment of 'encapsulated history.' *Antiquitas*, an ancient, pagan past that dogged the Christian present, lay close to the heart of medieval Christendom—an inescapable, endlessly fascinating companion, tinged with sadness and with a delicious sense of danger, a synecdoche of human nature itself, lived out under the shadow of Adam's sin. It is for this reason that the Christianization of the Roman world has remained a problem. The scholar

⁵⁴ e.g. Theodoret, *Curatio affectionum graecarum* X. 80, ed. P. Canivet, *Théodoret de Cyr: Thérapeutique des maladies helléniques*, Sources chrétiennes 57 (Paris, 1958), p. 385; cf. VIII. 68, p. 335; Christian Gnilka, *Chrésis. Die Methode der Kirchenväter im Umgang mit der antiken Kultur* (Basel/Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 134–140.

must still struggle hard to catch a glimpse, behind the reassuring familiarity of a story told continuously in Western Europe from the fifth century onwards, the outlines of a world profoundly unlike our own, in which the decisive changes of this period took place.