HERETICS

The Creation of Christianity from the Gnostics to the Modern Church

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Constantine, Augustine, and the Criminalization of Heresy

The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus

> May He who dwells in Holy Trinity keep us all as one, and may He grant us by these saints the joy to be with Him. And may He grant that through their prayers He will keep us in peace in every land; that neither misbelief nor heresy may set us awry in folly. May He grant in our time joy and sweetness, and may He deliver us from the moans and stench of hell.
>
> — Chardri, *La Vie des Set Dormanz*

Chardri tells us that during the reign of Decius the faithful Christians of the venerable city of Ephesus confronted a stark choice between offering sacrifices to pagan gods and embracing martyrdom: being hanged, burned, and hacked to pieces, after which their severed heads would be paraded on pikes through the city. Those who survived had to endure the effrontery of new Roman temples being built in their midst, so that the city "was filled with blood and smoldering smoke and the stench of entrails which came from their butchery." Many Christians proved themselves to be cowards, handing over sacred texts and partaking of idol worship. Neighbors accused neighbors, sons and daughters informed on their parents, and the entire Christian community of Ephesus was split asun-

der. There had been persecution before, but it had never been so swingeing.

Seven noble young men behaved with conspicuous valor, however, continuing their religious services in secret and refusing to pollute themselves with pagan ceremonies. When confronted by the emperor, the men boldly declared that they despised the Roman gods more than the lowest dog, and cared not if Roman idols were found in sewers or in the loftiest temple — they were wooden atrocities, best used as fuel for the furnace.

Realizing that they had incurred the emperor's wrath, the seven decided to flee into the mountains. One of their number, Marcus,[1] occasionally ventured into town in disguise to gather food and report back on the emperor's activities. The situation only worsened, with more insults being inflicted on Christianity and more of its acolytes falling away. Worryingly, the emperor had ordered his generals to seek out the seven Christians and one night, after they had fallen asleep, troops found their isolated cave and blocked up its entrance with limestone — effectively burying them alive.

Seeing this, God put his seven dedicated followers into a deep sleep that lasted for more than a hundred years. Then, one morning in the last decades of the fourth century, a group of local workmen who were scouring the mountains for rocks came across the isolated cave and set about unblocking its entrance. The seven noble youths were awakened and, so far as they were aware, only a single night had passed. Marcus set out on another of his furtive trips into Ephesus. He was as terrified as ever, but when he reached the city gates he was startled by the sight of a beautiful cross. He saw yet more crosses as he moved through the city, and glistening Christian churches, and he even heard people talking openly of the Virgin Mary and swearing by the Holy Ghost. Marcus assumed that he had gone mad or was dreaming, but he continued on his way to buy provisions for his friends.

He came to a stall and proceeded to buy some bread, only the coins he handed over bore the image of the long-dead emperor Decius. The vendor asked Marcus where he had come across such precious artifacts, and when a befuddled Marcus could provide no satisfactory answer, he was put on trial as a thief who had obviously stumbled upon a cache of buried treasure. All that was left to Marcus was to recount his story: that, so far as he knew, it was a hundred and more years earlier and he and his friends had recently moved into a cave in the mountains to evade the Christian-hating troops of the emperor.

Understandably, the Ephesians were skeptical, but they allowed Marcus to lead them to his cave and there — with God's providence at their backs — a startling discovery was made. When the cave had been sealed up all those decades earlier, two covert Christians had concealed a small leaden tablet close to its entrance, so that future generations would not forget the sacrifice of the seven Christians trapped inside. This tablet was now unearthed, making Marcus's bizarre story suddenly more credible. When the Ephesians went inside the cave they found Marcus's six friends huddled together in a corner, terrified by what they assumed was the arrival of bloodthirsty imperial troops.

The people of Ephesus were now entirely convinced that they were witnesses to a miracle, and they invited the ruling emperor, Theodosius, to visit their city. He arrived without delay, and when the Christians went out to meet him, they did so not in chains, but with dancing and singing accompanied by harps, viols, and pipes. Roman emperors were no longer the persecutors of Christians, but their devoted protectors. They were Christians themselves. On meeting the seven young noblemen, Theodosius fell to his knees and "worshipped them humbly," basking in the light of their faces, which glowed "as does the sun's heat at midday in the month of May." But then, with their travails over, the seven young men sud-

denly "laid themselves down without grief or pain and rendered their souls to the Lord God Almighty." Theodosius was desolate: "Whosoever saw a noble emperor so stricken by grief?" He wept profusely, kissed each of the young men in turn, placed his silken cloak over their bodies, "and bade them rest in peace." Grief soon gave way to reverence, however. The emperor decreed that the bodies of the seven men should be placed in golden reliquaries and that a church of marble and limestone should be built around the cave. These men were saints, he declared; their memory was to be celebrated each year by feasts and celebrations.[2] WOW.

There can be few fictions that better encapsulate the extraordinary improvement in Christianity's fortunes. In the long decades during which the seven young men of Ephesus had been slumbering, Christianity had been turned from a persecuted sect into the established faith of the Roman Empire. As late as the early fourth century, Christians had made up perhaps 5 percent of the empire's population, the vast majority of them concentrated in the Greek-speaking cities of the eastern Mediterranean. They were usually obliged to worship in secret, they were vastly outnumbered by pagans and Jews, and, as we have seen, the first decade of the fourth century had witnessed the most brutal persecution Christianity had yet endured.

Only a few years later, it was a very different world. Christianity would first be tolerated, then it would become politically sanctioned and embark on the road to becoming culturally dominant. It all began with Constantine: the ancestor of Theodosius and the man who, for eminently self-serving reasons, allowed Christianity to survive and, better yet, to thrive. This would have epochal consequences for the cause of Christian unity. As soon as Christianity

won imperial approval, the crushing of heresy would no longer simply be a matter of theological purity or solidarity. It would come to be seen as a political necessity.

Constantine

The Christian-hating Diocletian, an enlightened and progressive emperor in many regards, abdicated in 305. He was succeeded as leader of the western half of the empire by Constantius, who in turn died at York, in northern England, a year later and passed on the reins of power to his son, Constantine. Constantine would turn out to be the most influential of emperors, the man who built a city in the east, Constantinople, that rivaled and then succeeded Rome, but his route to plenitude was not straightforward. At his father's death, Constantine's political ascendancy was secure throughout Gaul and Iberia, but in Italy he faced a significant rival in the person of Maxentius. After fighting southward in the following years, Constantine finally joined battle with Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in October 312. Despite being severely outnumbered, Constantine was victorious and went on to take the city of Rome: he had no doubt about who was responsible. The chroniclers tell of Constantine seeing a cross of light in the sky the day before battle, or having dreams in which Christ promised his support if Constantine convinced his soldiers to wear Christian symbols. In the wake of victory, not wishing to offend his new benefactor, Constantine pledged to lift all prohibitions against Christian worship, to return property seized from Christian communities, and, in effect, to turn Christianity into one of the approved religions of the empire. This was all enshrined in Roman law by the Edict of Milan in 313.

The events at the Milvian Bridge did not represent quite so damascene a moment as the chroniclers suggested: in fact, long before 312, Constantine had proven himself to be relatively tolerant of Christianity. Nor should we assume that Constantine simply

switched his entire religious allegiance to Christ. The complexities of his spiritual imagination should not be underestimated. He was the inheritor of a Roman polytheistic tradition and it seems likely that the Christian God was only ever one deity in his personal pantheon.

But if, for the time being, Christianity was only one among many religions that shared the benefits of political approbation, this still brought huge advantages. Suddenly, imperial troops began to wear Christian symbols on their helmets, clergymen were granted generous tax exemptions, and grandiose basilicas were constructed across what was quickly turning into something called Christendom. A very welcome die had been cast and while there was some backsliding among Constantine's successors, rival faiths were supplanted by the Gospel with extraordinary dispatch. By the year 381, Christianity was not merely tolerated: it had become the empire's only legal form of religious worship.

Such a staggering transformation did not come without a cost. We are apt to forget that it tolled the death knell for pagan religions, which had served the Roman Empire for centuries. In 386, a man named Libanius, who was devastated by the piecemeal destruction of the old faiths, pleaded with the sitting emperor to rein in the excesses of Christian officials. They "hasten to attack the temples with sticks and stones and bars of iron, and in some cases, disdaining these, with hands and feet. Then utter desolation follows, with the stripping of roofs, demolition of walls, the tearing down of statues and the overthrow of altars, and the priests must either keep quiet or die. After demolishing one, they scurry to another, and to a third, and trophy is piled on trophy." Libanius sought to remind the emperor that the newly unfashionable gods had overseen the rise and expansion of Rome. Many was the peasant in the fields who still looked upon those gods to "bless their labors" and, on a more practical note, it was surely foolish of the emperor to demolish some of his most precious real estate.[3] There is a neglected tragedy here, and

also the often overlooked story of how the ancient faiths of Rome struggled for survival during the coming centuries.

As for Christianity, the arrival of imperial support was undoubtedly a boon, but it also made the subject of heresy more potent than ever. In such a context—one in which the enduring, albeit troubled, relationship between church and state first emerged—unity of Christian belief took on a colossal importance. In the interests of preserving the social and political stability of his dominions, it was now the emperor's duty to stamp out any divisions and dissensions within the Christian community. Heterodoxy, and so it would remain for more than a thousand years, was now a political problem, and the heretic was comparable to the traitor. Deviance from orthodoxy was no longer a simple theological transgression. As Constantine had informed his empire, heretics were to be treated as the pests of society and the pernicious enemies of the human race.

Such thoughts would gather considerable pace in the century after Constantine, and no document sums up the new political ramifications of heresy quite as well as the Theodosian Code: a digest and refinement of the previous century's legislation, promulgated by the emperor Theodosius II in 438. As book sixteen of the code announced, all citizens of the empire were to "believe in the single deity of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity." "The rest," the code continued, who tried to "sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas," were to be "adjudge[d] demented and insane." "Their meeting places shall not receive the names of churches and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of our own initiative." People who behaved badly, who continued to attend pagan sacrifices, were to be denounced, and those who approved of their deeds "shall be beaten publicly with clubs," unless, of course, they were of sufficiently lofty social rank to avoid such indignities, in which case they were to be punished with hefty fines. Any who betrayed their faith and profaned their baptism would be unable to

give testimony in court, make wills, or receive inheritances. Christians who behaved well, by contrast, were to be showered with privileges. Priests, along with their families and servants, were to enjoy exemptions from taxation and were not expected to make financial contributions to the post wagons that sent correspondence across the empire. This was fitting recognition of the fact that "our state is sustained more by religion than by official duties and physical toil and sweat." It was a fine time to be a member of the First Estate.

These were very confident pronouncements and, by the year 438, they had garnered a staggering level of support: quite why it had all been so easy, quite why Christianity just seems to have won the day, remains one of the great historical mysteries. Beyond doubt, part of the answer resides in the fact that the fourth century was teeming with heresies. There was an obvious need to impose order on the Christian world, and Constantine and his successors (if we ignore the occasional fourth-century heretical or pagan emperor) were more than happy to step into the breach. They were quick to realize the political potential of launching campaigns against troublesome groups of Christians. Constantine, who set the tone that generations of kings, emperors, and rulers of third-rate palatinates would dutifully follow, reveled in his new role as arbiter and protector of the Christian faith.

This was where power began to dominate the heretical equation. There was a huge difference between persecuted priests in Antioch and Alexandria falling out with one another and the ruler of an empire becoming vexed by the unseemly squabbles of his subjects. The stakes had been raised, and the empire pounced, not least when heresy threatened to undermine the emperor's authority. One of the first victims of this new dispensation was, once again, not a deviant or a lunatic, but an austere, devout Libyan cleric named Arius (c. 250–336). He had made the fateful decision to formulate a provocative answer to the most basic theological question of all: just who was Jesus Christ? As we have seen, people had already

been providing rival solutions to this conundrum for centuries. Now, however, they would be answerable to the emperor of Rome, and the massed bishops of the Christian world gathered, under that mighty emperor's auspices, at the first of the church's great councils. Nicaea happened, and heresy would never be quite the same again.

Who Was Christ?

It might be supposed that reaching firm conclusions about so fundamental an issue as the identity of Jesus Christ would have been one of Christianity's first and most urgent priorities. The notion of a god becoming a man and walking among us was, after all, Christianity's boldest and most controversial claim. In fact, down to the fourth century, many different theories percolated in the minds of the faithful. There were two towering difficulties: how to achieve a balance between Christ's divinity and his humanity, and how to conceptualize Christ's relationship with the Father. Getting Christ just right was terribly important, and this area of divinity, known as Christology, was destined to become one of the most hard fought arenas of Christian theology. It wasn't resolved in the era of Ignatius of Antioch, it still wasn't resolved by the time of the Unitarian Bostonians of the nineteenth century, and even Constantine could not quite manage to impose a solution that pleased everyone — though he did try very hard indeed.

Offering a palatable account of early Christological debates is extremely difficult, not least because the subject is saturated with a host of confusing Greek philosophical terms and some of the most abstruse theorizing that Christianity ever managed to fashion. Perhaps the best approach, though it runs the risk of simplification, is to keep in mind the idea of a theological pendulum, swinging between two trends: ideas that concentrated a little too hard on Christ's divine attributes and those that overemphasized his human aspects. When the pendulum lurched in one direction there was an

almost inevitable reaction, which, with alarming regularity, again swung too far toward the opposite extreme. Along the way, and at different times, those who fell out of favor, whose theologizing was adjudged unacceptable, were often accused of heresy. Since we have already mentioned Arius, it would be sensible to begin, in medias res, with his story.

One of his fiercest critics, Epiphanius, described Arius as "very tall in stature, with downcast countenance."[4] He also thought of Arius as a "guileful serpent" who, with his gentle words and humble clothes, adopted a veneer of piety and holiness in order to hoodwink the gullible into accepting his dangerous theories. It might be more evenhanded to think of Arius as one of those people who exposed the root-deep perplexity of Christianity's big idea: that God could become a man and save our souls.

Regrettably, we know very little about the specifics of Arius's thought: all we have directly from his pen are a handful of letters and a few fragments of his rather odd poetry. What he believed has to be largely reconstructed from hostile sources (which isn't ideal) and, to make things even more confusing, there are long-standing arguments about the origins of his theology: historians talk about the influence of Neo-Platonism, or the impact of Origen, but no one can ever pin Arius down with precision. Most annoying of all, it is almost impossible to disentangle Arius's original ideas from the meditations of those who came after him and who were tarred with the Arian brush.

Still, and with all this in mind, we can at least venture an informed guess about Arius's basic agenda. He seems to have thought that treating the Father and the Son as co-equals (both existing, as divinities are apt to do, for eternity, and both made of the same divine substance) was a colossal error. There was only one God, "alone unbegotten, alone everlasting, alone unbegun, alone true, alone having immortality, alone wise, alone sovereign."[5] In this scheme, Christ was to be thought of as a creation of the Father: a

subordinate being who, until God had deemed it necessary, had not existed. There was nothing eternal about Jesus Christ. As Arius allegedly put it, there was a time "when Jesus Christ was not." Christ was still far superior to any human, of course, and his deeds had undoubtedly played a huge role in humanity's salvation. He was most certainly a cut above and he deserved all the devotional plaudits being lavished upon him, but to suggest that he was, like the Father, eternal and unbegotten — a god in every sense of the word — surely threatened to send an avowedly monotheistic Christian religion down the path of polytheism.

It is useful to think of Arius as representing one of those aforementioned swings in the Christological pendulum. During the second and third centuries there had been a recurring theological tendency to stress Christ's divinity at the expense of his humanity. We have already encountered one example of this in Docetism. You will remember the proposition (hated by Ignatius of Antioch, embraced by Marcion) that there was only ever one God and that, by the means that are available only to a deity, he had stepped into mortal fancy dress and convinced everyone that he was a bona fide human being. Think of it as a divine con trick — a very clever one — the Docetists might have argued, but don't think of Christ as a person who suffered toothaches, who was possessed of human rationality, or who had a prenatal past in the innards of a woman called Mary from a town in Palestine. That, so the Docetists insisted, was not how a god behaved.

Another school of thought, a version of the ever-puzzling heretical category known as Monarchianism, also talked a great deal about the oneness of the divinity. For the Roman cleric Sabellius, as just one example, the components of the Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Ghost — were best understood as convenient ways of expressing different "modes" of the one God. Thinking of the Father doing the creating, the Son doing the redeeming, and the Holy Ghost going about its post-crucifixion business allowed us feeble-minded

humans to comprehend the various tasks of the Godhead, but that didn't mean that there were three distinct divine persons. Thinkers like Sabellius preferred to talk about three aspects or three energies of a single divine entity. If nothing else, this line of reasoning owned up to the fact that the nature of the triune God is beyond our understanding and that the terms we use to describe it are our own invention. They represented a clumsy attempt to fathom the unfathomable, but that didn't grant them a metaphysical reality.

Such ideas caused much grumbling. In a sense, they were attractive theological approaches: insisting on the unity of one single God in a monotheistic religion always made good sense. However, they also did considerable damage to safer analyses of the Trinity and, most worrying of all, they opened up troublesome consequences for the human element in Christ's atonement. It was vital, many Christian thinkers insisted, that Christ had been, in a very real sense, a human being: if he died for our sins, and if that death was to have any redemptive value, then he had to have been one of us — the nails had to hurt as they were hammered in.

Arius, attracted by the concept of Christ's human aspects, can sensibly be understood as part of the backlash to such divinity-and-nothing-else ideas, but, according to many onlookers, he pushed things much too far. His critics growled that Arius was suggesting that Christ was really just an exceptional human being, lacking the eternal attributes of a true divinity. This was seen as throwing the theological baby out with the bathwater: it looked, to some, like an echo of an old Christological heresy, subordinationism, which, during the church's first three centuries, had insisted that only the Father was a genuine deity and that Christ always had to be understood as subdivine, or subordinate. Right or wrong, Arius was deemed to be making Christ into little more than a creature, however lofty and exceptional.

During the first decades of the fourth century, Arius's ideas caused mayhem. A local theological squabble in Alexandria spread

out across the entire eastern church, with bishops taking up positions in the competing Arian and anti-Arian camps. A local episcopal council denounced Arius's position in 321 — asking, "What man of any piety is not horror-stricken, stopping his ears against such filth?" — but this official statement apparently took little heat out of the controversy. Arius moved on to Palestine and Syria and began to win support (or at least sympathy) from churchmen as eminent as Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia.

At first, the emperor Constantine did not seem to grasp the significance of the Arian crisis. He was content to send letters to Arius and his main antagonist, the bishop of Alexandria, urging them to stop discussing such confusing, intricate points of theology. "It becomes us on such topics to check loquacity," he advised. After all, "how few are capable either of adequately expounding or understanding the import of matters so vast and profound?" Quarreling about such matters, Constantine concluded, was "vulgar . . . [and] not suitable to the intelligence of priests and prudent men."[6] It was very much hoped that the rival camps could simply agree to differ and let peace return to the eastern church.

They could not, and it began to dawn on Constantine that resolving the Arian crisis provided a signal opportunity to assert his newly minted authority over the Christian faith. So it was that, in 325, the very first of the great councils (those described as ecumenical, which in this context simply means representing the "whole church") was staged in the city of Nicaea, in present-day Turkey.

It is one of the great tragedies of Christian history that we have so little detailed evidence of what transpired. We can be certain of one thing, however: it was all a very long way from the decorous church councils of more recent times. As many as three hundred bishops accepted Constantine's invitation, forming — as the contemporary church historian Eusebius put it — "a vast garland of priests, composed of a variety of the choicest flowers."[7] Many of them bore the scars of persecution and torture inflicted in less

happy times and, so far as we can tell, they were determined to bicker unendingly.

Constantine was having none of it. From the outset, he tried to turn the entire assembly into an exercise in propaganda and showmanship: into an assertion of his God-given authority. At the first opportunity, as Eusebius remembered it, Constantine entered the council's debating chamber "like some heavenly messenger of God, clothed in raiment which glittered, as it were, with rays of light, reflecting the glowing radiance of a purple robe and adorned with the brilliant splendour of gold and precious stones." The awestruck assembled bishops, Eusebius dutifully continued, had downcast eyes, barely daring to look at Constantine, at "the blush on his countenance, his majestic dignity and invincible strength and vigour."

Constantine's message was made abundantly clear. "Internecine strife within the Church of God is far more evil, far more dangerous, than any kind of war or conflict." "The first object of my endeavours," he announced, "[is] the unity of faith, sincerity of love, and community of feeling in regard to the worship of Almighty God."[8] Arius and his ideas were interrogated in sessions across the city's churches and in the chambers of the imperial palace and — through what must have been a heated process of debate and browbeating — a consensus emerged: one from which, rather surprisingly, only a handful of bishops dissented. An indication, perhaps, of the tremendous political pressure that had been brought to bear. Arius was deemed a heretic. Orders were issued to burn any surviving copies of his books, and the heresiarch himself was banished to Illyria.

In direct refutation of Arius's teachings, the council composed what would come to be known as the Nicene Creed: a statement of belief that, with the inclusion of some alterations made at subsequent councils, remains operative within much of the Christian church to this day. "We believe in one God," it begins, in roundly monotheistic terms, "the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all

that is seen and unseen." We also believe, it continues, "in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God," and he was "eternally begotten of the Father" — not, in other words, an entity that had only come into existence when the Father had created him — and he was "true God from true God . . . of one substance with the Father . . . begotten, not made."

It was an idea that would endure (and for perfectly sound reasons) but, for many people (both then and subsequently), it looked a lot like a fudge and it certainly failed to dampen down Christological speculation. Arianism itself was not quite so easily silenced. Constantine's own sister was won over to its arguments, as was a subsequent emperor, Constantius II (r. 337–361). And even when Arianism was effectively eradicated within the ranks of the imperial political elite, it still enjoyed a thriving afterlife among the tribes — the Ostrogoths, the Visigoths, the Vandals, the Lombards and all — who were shortly to tear the western half of the empire asunder.

Just as important, many Christians were unconvinced that Nicaea ought to be the final word in the long and winding Christological debate. Constantine and his apologists endeavored to put a decidedly optimistic spin on the events that had taken place there: "At the command of God, the splendour of truth has dissipated all dissensions, schisms, tumults, and deadly poisons of discord."[9] It was not quite so straightforward. Not everyone within the Christian fraternity was happy with the message of the Nicene Creed. Many were flabbergasted that a word drawn from Greek philosophy — *homoousios*, a word that did not appear *once* in scripture — had been used to explain how the Father and the Son consisted of the same substance. Others, largely in reaction to Arius's musings, began, yet again, to lay exaggerated stress on Christ's divinity, and a whole new batch of Christological heresies emerged during the decades after Nicaea. The pendulum began to swing once more.

A heresy known as Monophysitism quickly entered the fray. Harking back to third-century ideas, it insisted that, after the incarnation, Christ only had one (*mono*) entirely divine nature (*physis*). As one of its most radical followers, Apollinarius of Laodicea, argued, Christ had simply not possessed a human soul or consciousness: he was all God. Such notions were, in their turn, condemned (at a council in Constantinople in 381), but they continued to gain adherents. The pendulum began to swing back, and a theologian like Nestorius, made bishop of Constantinople in 428, started to talk about the importance of distinguishing (in some way) between Christ's divine and human attributes. Christ was made up of two separate, entirely distinguishable persons conjoined in a metaphysically unique way. Yet again, eyebrows were raised (not least those of Cyril, Nestorius's great rival over in Alexandria). Someone like Cyril was committed to the ideas of Christ's divinity and equality among all members of the Trinity. Nestorius was a rather rash and clumsy thinker and at one point he took aim at an increasingly well established term for the Virgin Mary: *theotokos*, God bearer. His enemies were not impressed. By rejecting this coinage and by attempting (by his rivals' calculation) to make two Christs, he came under fire. In 431, another of the church's councils in Ephesus descended into farce as two of the Christian world's most eminent leaders exchanged bitter accusations of heresy. Cyril, the patriarch of Alexandria, and Nestorius joined battle. For Nestorius, it was the end of an illustrious career and, after a period languishing in a monk's cell at Antioch, he was banished.

Not that this resolved anything, and only a few years later, in 451, the church felt obliged to mount another council, at Chalcedon. Here, something approaching a workable solution (though some would call it a compromise) was hammered out. The extremes of Arius (who had been accused of paying too much attention to Christ's humanity) and the extremes of the Monophysites (who had all but ignored Christ's humanity in order to highlight

his divinity) were both rejected. Instead, Christians were now informed that Christ was fully human and fully divine. He had a divine nature *and* a human nature, but — despite what the Nestorians might think — they were joined in a *single* divine person by means of something called the hypostatic union.

The Monophysites were not pleased, and that is why the Monophysite Copts of Egypt seceded from the rest of Christianity and established a church of their own: one that still survives today. This was one of the more dramatic early examples of a recurrent tendency in the history of heresy: an allegedly heretical group of Christians setting up their own theological stall, which, so far as they were concerned, represented authentic Christianity.

All of these Christological debates had confused and divided Christianity for more than two centuries. We stand amazed that such theological technicalities had such an impact, but they possessed extraordinary power in the early church. As Vincent of Lérins put it (and at this point we might remind ourselves of his neat and tidy "everywhere, always, and by everyone" catch phrase), "Not only relationships by marriage and by blood, friendship, and family, but cities, provinces, nations — even the whole Roman empire — were shaken and uprooted from their foundation."[10] As the bishop Gregory of Nyssa explained, it had been impossible to buy a loaf of bread or ask for some change in Constantinople without someone engaging you in Christological debate.

The solution, this mystical idea of a hypostatic union, was far from perfect and, as we'll see, arguments about Christ's identity would rumble on down the centuries. The decrees of Chalcedon — ideas to which the vast majority of Christians would still subscribe — can best be understood as an attempt to find some middle ground: an attempt to stop the pendulum swinging quite so violently. Too many people had ignored Christ's humanity, too many people had questioned his divinity, so why not let him have both, in some strange and wonderful way. Whether or not this made theo-

logical sense, it had significant political advantages. And that, so far as the history of heresy is concerned, is the crucial point. It was the process, as much as the outcome, that mattered.

At the Council of Nicaea, a political mechanism for responding to heresy, for imposing religious conformity, was inaugurated. Much was achieved in the name of unity in 325. Arguments over how to calculate the date of Easter were settled (more or less), rules about episcopal elections were codified, it was agreed that no clergyman ought to live in the same house as a woman unless she was his sister, mother, or aunt — the taproot of an enduring Christian obsession with clerical celibacy, and (as a reminder of just how long ago and far away Nicaea was) it was announced that priests who had been castrated by barbarians against their will should be allowed to retain their jobs, while those who (eager to become eunuchs) had done the castrating themselves ought to be dismissed.

The most epochal development of all, however, had been the enshrining of the idea that it was the duty of political leaders and churchmen to work together in the pursuit of "our common peace and harmony, and in the cutting off of every heresy." This is what Nicaea and all the subsequent councils of the early church were all about. Some have seen this as a tragedy but this does not diminish its significance. For the next twelve centuries, churchmen would gather at their councils: events, so an awestruck medieval observer once noticed, where "the senate of the whole Christian republic comes together, to consider and give judgment to the universe." The participants, dedicated to declaiming truth, were convinced that the eradication of heresy was as much a political duty as a theological one and, from the year 325 onward, temporal rulers would always be at their backs.

This was bad news for heresy. Previously, theological tussles

had produced little more than acrimonious tracts, bitter sermons, and the odd exorcism or two. Now, because political power had intervened, the stakes had been raised. Local populations, when a council materialized in their midst, knew this very well.

They would sometimes gather outside the churches and palaces in which debates raged about the nature of God and the quiddities of mankind. They would cheer their champions and spit out venomous accusations of anathema at those churchmen they despised. When decisions went well at such councils, the local people would escort clerics home to their lodgings with joyful, drunken, torch-lit processions. When decisions went badly they would burn men in effigy and make bonfires of their books. In better moods the crowds would hold placards aloft. In worse moods they would fight bloody battles in the streets. Nor should we suppose that events were any more decorous inside the halls of power. At council after council, from the fourth century to the sixteenth, churchmen would trade accusations of heresy, and the eastern and western halves of the Christian world would play out their ancient rivalries. Armed guards would sometimes be drafted in to prevent eruptions of physical violence.[11]

The only question remaining, and it cropped up almost immediately, was what steps these politicians and churchmen were entitled to take in order to eradicate the heretical menace. Was the burning of books sufficient, or excommunication, or banishment to Illyria?

In the decades after Nicaea, clear signs showed which way the wind was blowing. A flood of anti-heretical legislation made its way onto the statute book. Regional governors were instructed to exile any heretics they encountered or, at the very least, to close down their churches, seize their property, and trample on their political and economic privileges. At different times, heretics were forbidden from disposing of their property in their wills, from owning

slaves, from holding office, from conducting business transactions, and from receiving poor relief.

All of which raised a crucial issue. When confronted with heresy, was it appropriate to employ coercion or, at the very least, the threat of force? As we are about to discover, this was another question that was asked and resolutely answered during the reigns of the first Christian emperors, and the answer would hold good for more than a millennium. Matters came to a head with the Donatists of North Africa and the impassioned response of the most famous church father of them all, Augustine.

Donatism

In Europe and North America, we have an unfortunate habit of conceptualizing Christianity as a solidly Western enterprise. This is as about as legitimate as portraying Jesus Christ—as so much of our devotional art does—as a bearded, white-skinned, flowing-cloak-wearing individual who bears a striking resemblance to a citizen of a Renaissance Italian city-state. That he was an olive-skinned Palestinian is easily forgotten. So too is the fact that, during its first five centuries, Christianity was a decidedly un-European affair. As we have witnessed time and again, the crucibles of Christian endeavor were to be found in the East: in the rival cities of Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and many more besides. Rome, for all its later boisterousness, simply did not count for a great deal.

Those epic decisions at the Council of Nicaea were reached by the bishops of the eastern end of the Mediterranean. The sitting pope, the eminently forgettable Sylvester I, sent a brace of representatives, and a sprinkling of Western prelates (from Cordoba in Spain and Lyon in France) fetched up for the council's deliberations, but the decisions that would define the future of Christianity were made by those we would now describe as Greeks, Egyptians,

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17 William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 1.
18 "On the Unity of the Church," paragraphs 5, 6, 9 (ANF 5).
19 Erasmus, Letter 1301, to the theologians of Louvain, in *Collected Works*, eds. Richard J. Schoeck and Guy Bedouelle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), volume 9, 134.
20 "Contra Celsus," book 4, chapter 23; book 1, chapter 63, 7 (ANF 4).
21 "Letter to Donatus," epistle 1 (ANF 5).
22 "To the Martyrs," chapter 2 (ANF 3).
23 Robert McQueen Grant, *Second-Century Christianity: A Collection of Fragments* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 8.
24 Eusebius, "Church History," book 5, chapter 1 (NPNF, second series, 1).

3. Constantine, Augustine, and the Criminalization of Heresy

1 Often referred to as Malchus in some versions of the story.
2 B. S. Merrilees, ed., *La Vie des Set Dormanz* (Oxford: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 35, 1977), passim.
3 A. F. Norman, *Libanius: Selected Works* (Loeb Classical Library, 1977), oration xxx, 8–10.
4 Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 32.
5 Maurice F. Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 10.
6 Socrates Scholasticus, "Church History," book 1, chapter 7 (NPNF, second series, 2).
7 "Life of Constantine," book 3, chapter 6 (NPNF, second series, 1).
8 Ibid., chapter 17.
9 Socrates Scholasticus, "Church History," book 1, chapter 9 (NPNF, second series, 2).
10 John B. Henderson, *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy: Neo-Confucian, Islamic, Jewish, and Early Christian Patterns* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 8.
11 See Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
12 "Letter to Victorianus," [letter 111] (NPNF, first series, 1).
13 "Letter to Boniface," [letter 185] (NPNF, first series, 1).
14 John Coffey, "The Martyrdom of Sir Henry Vane the Younger: From Apoc-

alyptic Witness to Heroic Whig," in *Martyrs and Martyrdom in England, c. 1400–1700*, ed. Thomas Freeman and Thomas Mayer (Woodbridge, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 228.

15 Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York: Norton, 2006), 96.

16 "Commonitorium," chapters 11, 18 (NPNF, series 2, 11).

17 "The Prescription Against Heretics," chapter 1 (ANF 3).

18 Gerard H. McCarren, "Development of Doctrine," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*, ed. Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 119.

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1 Dmitri Obolensky, *The Bogomils: A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 35.

2 Janet Hamilton et al., eds., *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998), 66–77.

3 Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 152; Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453: Sources and Documents* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 152.

4 Francis E. Peters, *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: The Classical Texts and Their Interpretation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 59.

5 Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 153.

6 Besançon, *Forbidden Image*, 166–168.

7 Oliver J. Thatcher and Edgar Holmes McNeal, eds., *Source Book for Mediæval History* (New York: Scribners, 1905).

8 Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 159.

9 Besançon, *Forbidden Image*, 131.

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1 Michael Frassetto, *Heretic Lives: Medieval Heresy from Bogomil and the Cathars to Wyclif and Hus* (London: Profile, 2007), 30–33; Walter Wakefield and Austin Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 77–79.

2 Mark Gregory Pegg, *A Most Holy War: The Albigensian Crusade and the Battle for Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

3 Merrall Llewelyn Price, *Consuming Passions: The Uses of Cannibalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2003), 49.