

## Chapter Six

### The Origins of Christianity:

#### The Son of Man and the Mystery of the Empty Tomb

Our main source for the origins of Christianity has been and still is the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and the New Testament generally, including the letters of Paul and Acts of the Apostles. For most of the time that the history of Christianity has been written, at least until the eighteenth century, the Gospels were accepted almost without exception as a reliable historical source. The Gospels were thought to tell it as it was. The problem was that one could support this contention only insofar as one did not examine the Gospels too closely. The reason is that, while the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—tell roughly the same story, they differed to a significant degree on details.

The original idea of comparing the Gospels to each other was confined to confirmation: when a description appears in all four Gospels, then one has confirmation that what was being described is what happened. Scholars and other people interested in the Bible were led to a more and more skeptical position because they were finding that the Gospels were not so much independent confirmations of each other as independent contradictions of each other. As early as the third century A.D., the pagan Neoplatonist Porphyry (ca. 233–ca. 309) critiqued the Gospels, and dismissed their accuracy on the basis of contradictions between them, but his critique was dismissed by Christians of the time.

Modern scholarship has come a long way from accepting uncritically the testimony provided in the Gospels and the New Testament solely at face value.

*Hermann Reimarus* (1694–1768). The first person to undertake this problem in modern times

was Hermann Reimarus in a book that was published after his death. Reimarus did not want the book published while he was still alive because he realized that he was dealing with an extremely sensitive topic. Reimarus probably realized that he should not tell people that their religion is wrong and that the book they had come to use as a guide for their lives and the very salvation of their soul is mistaken. For him to say that all these years they have been believing in the wrong thing could have got him into a great deal of trouble. Reimarus concluded that it would be better if he were not around when his book came out. He worked on the parallel readings and he noticed things. For example, in Matthew it says that Judas, after he betrayed Jesus, hanged himself:

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself (Mt 27:3–5).

In contrast, Acts says that Judas died either in an accidental fall or from exploding:

In those days Peter stood up among the brethren (the company of persons was in all about a hundred and twenty), and said, 'Brethren, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry. Now this man bought a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong [or: swelling up] he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out (Acts 1:15–18).

This is an apparent contradiction that would seem to indicate that Judas died twice, once by

hanging, the second by an accidental fall (or from swelling up). Reimarus pointed out another contradiction: in the Gospel of John, the crucifixion occurs before Passover, whereas in the other three Gospels the crucifixion occurs during Passover. In one sense, it is not a big difference, but in another sense, if one reads the Gospels to get at the Truth, these differences are a little more than irritating. But pointing out contradictions in Gospel stories was not a big deal; it had been done before. What was cutting edge was Reimarus' deciding that the miracles described in the Gospels could not have happened. His views on the miracles are representative of views of eighteenth-century Enlightenment *philosophes* who held Deistic beliefs, according to which God had created the universe much as a clockmaker constructs a clock, set it in motion, and then did not interfere with it. Therefore, miracles, according to the Deists, do not happen. They are possible if God decided he wanted to, but he doesn't. Reimarus thought that the miracles described were unworthy of notice. And he denied the resurrection of Jesus. He conceded that the moral teachings in the New Testament had some value but felt that Jesus was similar to a number of other visionaries who were in Palestine at the time. When Reimarus' book was published it did not create a huge outcry, mainly because the author was dead. There was no one to attack. Besides, he had been a Deist, not really a Christian.

*David Friedrich Strauss* However, in 1835, a young man (he was 27 years old at the time) named David Friedrich Strauss had the temerity to publish, while he was still living, a book challenging the reliability of the Gospels as a historical source. Besides that, he was a Christian. For Strauss, the miracles were mostly myth; he called them "sea stories and fish stories." The Gospels, according to Strauss, were essentially propaganda by the early Christians to convert people to their cult. He thought that Jesus was a historical figure, that Jesus did exist, and

there may be some reliable historical information in the Gospels, but it was difficult to discern it. It was difficult to weed it out from what was propaganda. At one point in his book, Strauss wrote: “Nay, if we would be candid with ourselves, that which was once sacred history for the Christian believer is, for the enlightened portion of our contemporaries, only fable.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, Strauss lost his position at the university and had difficulty finding employment after that. He recanted his views in the 3rd edition of his book, but then in the next edition unrecanted them.

*Albert Schweitzer* Albert Schweitzer, in his doctoral dissertation, investigated the views on the Gospels and on the life of Jesus from Reimarus up to Schweitzer himself. He took a position that was skeptical, but not quite as skeptical as either Reimarus or Strauss. Schweitzer was of the opinion that one could extract reliable information from the Gospels, but one had to really test that information. One had to challenge whatever testimony the Gospels provided in order to find the kernel of truth. It is the Schweitzerian view that is behind many of the attempts to explain the miracles in the Gospels in terms of natural events.

*Miracles—Descriptions of Natural Events?* In analyzing the miracles in terms of natural phenomena, the assumption is that the descriptions in the Gospels are about real events that happened, but not in the way they are being described. All sorts of ingenious theories have been formulated to try to explain these supernatural occurrences. For example, the Gospel of John describes the miracle of the turning of water into wine:

On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there;

<sup>1</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined*,

Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples. When the wine failed, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. he said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast.' So they took it. When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now.' This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples in him (John 2:1–11).

The "naturalists" describe the turning of the water into wine by this possible occurrence: when the wine jugs were empty, there was some residue of wine in the bottom. When the servants poured the water into the jugs, the water mixed with the residue and created a kind of wine-flavored water. Possibly the steward was so drunk that he could not tell the difference.

Likewise, the miracle of the fishes and loaves, when Jesus spoke to the multitude, might be explained this way: It is dinnertime and people are hungry. Jesus is told that the people are stirring because they are hungry. He asks his disciples if there is any food to feed the masses. His disciples come up with, depending on which Gospel one is reading (or which section of Matthew), either five loaves and two fishes or seven loaves and a few small fish.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mark and Matthew differ on the details of feeding a large number of people with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. Jerome describes the difference between the two stories this way: "There were five loaves and two fishes, here seven loaves and a few little fishes; there they reclined upon the grass, here upon the ground; there five thou-

And, lo and behold, a miracle occurs: there is enough food for everybody. Those few loaves of bread and few fish are able to feed everyone.

As he landed [from the boat] he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a lonely place, and the hour is now late; send them away, to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat.’ But he answered them, ‘You give them something to eat.’ And they said to him, ‘Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat? And he said to them, ‘How many loaves have you? Go and see.’ And when they had found out, they said, ‘Five, and two fish.’ Then he commanded them all to sit down by companies upon the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And thanking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men (Mk 6:34–44).

One explanation for this story is that it was symbolic. The multitude were fed spiritually with the words (loaves and fishes) of Jesus’ teaching. Another explanation is a moral lesson in sharing. Jesus and his company had these few loaves and fishes. They began to share with people close to them. Those people shared with other people. Everybody else who had brought a little bit of food began to share with others who had not brought any food. And this is the

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sand are fed, here four thousand; there twelve baskets were filled; here seven large baskets.”

miracle of the fishes and loaves.

The cures and healings, which make up a large part of the miracle stories, has been attributed to “the power of suggestion.” Will Durant makes the argument:

That his powers were nevertheless exceptional seems proved by his miracles. Probably these were in most cases the result of suggestion—the influence of a strong and confident spirit upon impressionable souls. His presence was itself a tonic; at his optimistic touch the weak grew strong and the sick were made well. The fact that like stories have been told of other characters in legend and history does not prove that the miracles of Christ were myths. With a few exceptions they are not beyond belief; similar phenomena may be observed almost any day at Lourdes, and doubtless occurred in Jesus’ time at Epidaurus and other centers of psychic healing in the ancient world; the apostles too would work such cures.<sup>3</sup>

Durant goes on to point out that, in the Gospels, Jesus “attributed his cures to the ‘faith’ of those whom he healed” and “he could not perform miracles in Nazareth apparently because the people there looked upon him ‘as the carpenter’s son,’ and refused to believe in his unusual powers.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Morton Smith argues that some of the miracles “probably derive from reports of ‘cures’ that actually occurred in Jesus’ presence and were understood by the patients, the observers, and Jesus himself, as miracles performed by him.”<sup>5</sup> Smith goes on to describe his concept, based on a personal experience of his, of what may have been behind at least some of the miracles—that is, the casting out of demons.

<sup>3</sup> Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from Their Beginnings to A.D. 325*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1944, pp. 562–563.

<sup>4</sup> Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 563.

<sup>5</sup> Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, p. 9.

To understand their importance, we must remember that ancient Palestine had no hospitals or insane asylums. The sick and insane had to be cared for by their families, in their homes. The burden of caring for them was often severe and sometimes, especially in cases of violent insanity, more than the family could bear—the afflicted were turned out of doors and left to wander like animals. This practice continued to the present century; I shall never forget my first experience in the ‘old city’ of Jerusalem in 1940. The first thing I saw as I came through the Jaffa Gate was a lunatic, a filthy creature wearing an old burlap bag with neck and armholes cut through the bottom and sides. He was having a fit. It seemed to involve a conversation with some imaginary being in the air in front of him. He was pouring out a flood of gibberish while raising his hands as if in supplication. Soon he began to make gestures, as if trying to protect himself from blows, and howled as if being beaten. Frothing at the mouth, he fell to the ground on his face, lay there moaning and writhing, vomited, and had an attack of diarrhea. Afterwards he was calmer, but lay in his puddles of filth, whimpering gently. I stood where I had stopped when I first saw him, some fifty feet away, rooted to the spot, but nobody else paid any attention. There were lots of people in the street, but those who came up to him merely skirted the mess and walked by. He was lying on the sidewalk in front of a drugstore. After a few minutes a clerk came out with a box of sawdust, poured it on the puddles, and treated the patient with a couple of kicks in the small of the back. This brought him to his senses and he got up and staggered off, still whimpering, rubbing his mouth with one hand and his back with the other... Such was ancient psychotherapy.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus seemed able to cure some people at least temporarily through his presence if they believed he could cure them.

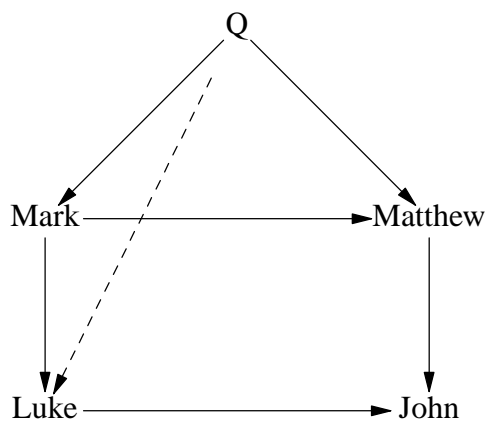
Behind this type of analysis is the attempt to find natural explanation for events that are described as miracles.

*Synoptic Problem* What has come to be called the Synoptic Problem is the problem of figuring out the relationship of the Gospels to one another. By comparing the number of passages that they have in common, and by trying to determine which borrowed from which, scholars have tried to solve this problem. They note that Matthew contains 600 of the 661 verses of Mark. Luke, on the other hand, contains only 350 of the 661 verses of Mark, which would

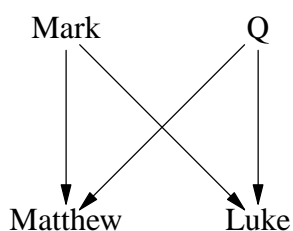
<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, p. 9.



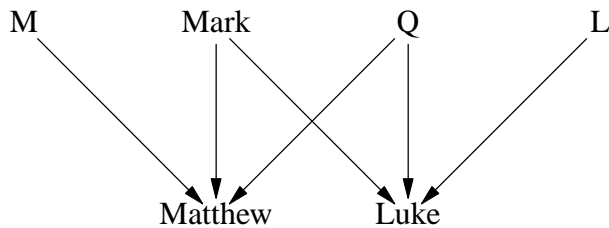
seem to indicate, first of all, that Matthew and Mark have more in common with each other than Luke and Mark do. Matthew and Luke contain 200 verses in common that are not found in Mark. The conclusion is that both Matthew and Luke have independent sources other than Mark. They get some of their information from Mark, while they get extraneous information from these other sources. One theory explains this relationship by suggesting that both Matthew and Luke derive from Mark. John, which according to this schema is the youngest of the Gospels, derives some of its information from Matthew and some of its information from Luke. But one has to explain where Matthew and Luke get their additional information. That hypothetical source is called Q (from the German word for source: *Quelle*). Q is thought by some scholars to be the oral or written tradition of the sayings of Jesus, those that often begin in the King James version, “Verily, I say unto you....”



Another schema tries to simplify this diagram, and sets up this relationship for the Gospels:



And a third schema attempts to delineate proto-Matthew material (M) and proto-Luke material (L) from Q, so that both Matthew and Luke have three sources: Mark, Q, and M in the case of Matthew; and Mark, Q, and L in the case of Luke:



A variant of this schema suggests that proto-Matthew (M) existed before Mark, and influenced the author of Mark.

There have even been attempts to identify Q more specifically, that is, what these sayings are and what the original form of Q was, if it was a written form. We have attempts to reconstruct Q.<sup>7</sup> The philological analysis, that is analysis of the words and variations of the syntax and so forth, suggest that Mark, Matthew, and Luke were originally composed in Greek, but that some of the material that shows up in the Synoptic Gospels may have been composed in Aramaic. The word “composed” is an ambiguous term because it is not clear whether this material was ever in any written form. Thus, the Aramaic material appears like raisins in the bun of Greek material. The evidence for this assertion is that many of the grammatical constructions and figures of speech found in the Gospels have Aramaic origins. When the Greek of the Gospels is translated into Aramaic, certain passages seem easily to arrange themselves into Aramaic verse.

<sup>7</sup> Burton Mack

*Dissident Views* The consensus view of modern biblical scholarship is that Mark is the earliest of the Gospels, that Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark, and that Q is a common source for what independent material appears in Matthew and Luke. There is another view expressed by William R. Farmer, who argues that Luke is the earliest of the Gospels, and that Mark and Matthew borrow from Luke.<sup>8</sup> But Farmer's argument is dependent on [...]. There is also speculation that Luke may have been written by a woman. Luke contains forty passages about women, more than any of the other Gospels.

*Recent Interpretations* The recent interpretations have focused on the attempt to get beyond the Gospels, to get beyond the written evidence and to return to the real person of Jesus. These interpretations have tried to figure out what Jesus taught and what events might have happened that would lead to the Gospels as we now have them. One of the more famous recent attempts is that of Han Kung, *On Being a Christian*, which resulted in the Catholic Church's denying that he was a theologian in the Church, although he still teaches theology in Germany. Kung argued that [??].

In 1974, the Flemish Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx published a book about Jesus, which he subtitled *An Experiment in Christology*. "Christology" is defined as an attempt to see Jesus as a living, breathing human being, not as an individual who realizes he is divine, but as someone who is a person like anybody else. Many of the arguments that Schillebeeckx used were later picked up by Thomas Sheehan, a professor of philosophy at Loyola University in Chicago, who published his *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* in 1986. What both Schillebeeckx and Sheehan focus on is the

<sup>8</sup> William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis*, New York: Macmillan, 1964.

concept of the empty tomb as the starting point of Christianity as a religion.

The Gospel explanation for the empty tomb is a little strange. After Jesus was crucified, the body is taken away and put presumably into some kind of cave. And a large stone is rolled in front of the opening. Then, depending on which Gospel one believes, either one woman (“Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark” [Jn 20:1]) or two women (“Now after the sabbath toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher” [Mt 28:1]) or three women (“And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices so that they might come and anoint him” [Mk 15:1]) or more than three women (“It was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them” [Lk 24:10]) came to put some oil, to anoint the body on the Sunday after the crucifixion. When she/they get there, the stone was already rolled back and, again depending on the Gospel, there is either one man in white sitting (“And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe” [Mk 16:5]) or two men standing (“While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel” [Lk 24:4]) or one angel sitting (“For an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it” [Mt 28:2]) or two angels in white sitting (“and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb, and saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain” [Jn 20:11–12]), who tell her/them that Jesus is not here. Then each of the Gospels (Mark only in a coda added later) tells about Jesus’ appearance to Mary Magdalene and the disciples and his eventual resurrection into heaven. What Schillebeeckx and Sheehan are arguing is that, as far as Jesus’ direct connection with the story is concerned, it stops with the empty tomb. Sheehan points out a few oddities. If the women knew, as the Gospels seem to indicate they did, that the tomb was covered up with a big stone,

how did they think they were going to anoint Jesus with the oil? Were they going to ask somebody to move the stone? Was such a thing allowed? Why do the Gospels differ on whether these are angels or men in white? In one sense, it may not make much difference whether it was one or two men in white sitting or standing, or one or two angels in white sitting or standing. In another sense, it may make a difference because what if it was just the gardener who was only trying to inform them that the body was not here, that someone had taken it away. It has been proposed that Joseph of Arimathia, supposedly one of Jesus' wealthy supporters, claimed the body and took it away for private burial elsewhere. But that raises the question of who Joseph of Arimathia was. He appears only once in the Gospels. Was he mentioned only to explain this one occurrence? And what if their description of a man or men in white was later interpreted as meaning an angel or angels? Subsequently, when Christianity began to spread, and recent converts to Christianity came to Jerusalem to see where Jesus lived, they were then shown the empty tomb. It became a religious shrine and all sorts of stories were made up about why the body was no longer there. So, instead of a gardener appearing, it is a mysterious man or men in white, and eventually angels that appear. It now becomes a mystical experience with Jesus arising miraculously from the dead somehow. Why the stone has to be rolled back is not clear either. Presumably Jesus could have passed through the walls of the cave without any need to roll back the stone. One possible explanation is that the stone had to be rolled back so people could see he was not there. Yet, if Jesus appeared to them later, then they would know he was not in the tomb. But these are questions that the Gospels leave unanswered and even unasked. What Sheehan concludes is that the answers to these questions do not matter to the true Christian believer because from their point of view what is important is the fact that Jesus lived and the fact that now he is in heaven, with the promise of the kingdom of God to come.

*Morton Smith* The view of Morton Smith is somewhat different from Kung, Schillebeeckx, and Sheehan, because the three of them are devout religious people. Their faith is not something that they question. Smith is a scholar, professor of ancient history at Columbia University, who debunks much of the religious aspects of early Christianity and the life of Jesus. A number of years ago Smith found in an eighteenth-century printed book on the end paper a handwritten copy of a previously unknown letter purporting to be from Clement, the third-century bishop of Alexandria. How a letter from the third-century Clement is copied into a printed book in the eighteenth century without any other copies being available raises some questions. And Smith notes that the eighteenth century was a time when forgeries were rife. What Smith did was to subject the letter to intense analysis in terms of style, language, and words. He compared the writing style of the letter to all the other known letters of Clement of Alexandria and compared it with other writers contemporaneous with Clement and came to the conclusion that the writing style of this letter is very close to that of Clement. If it is a forgery, then the forger had to know the writing style of Clement and be able to duplicate it. In the letter is a small quotation from a secret Gospel according to Mark. Smith also subjected that quotation to an intense analysis, compared it with the writing style of the Gospel of Mark that we have, and concluded that they coincided, and that it differed from the writing style of the rest of the letter. Smith concluded that a copy of Clement's letter reached the eighteenth century, was copied down into the end pages of this book, and then the original copy was lost or destroyed, so that all we have of Clement's letter is in this book. Smith's analysis is very convincing, while the arguments against it are rather weak. Smith provides some of them in his book, because as he was doing his analysis he sent copies of his chapters to noted scholars to see their reaction. While one may grant the improbability of a letter of Clement surviving in only one eighteenth-century copy, still the evidence Smith brings to bear

in favor of this letter's authenticity, and the way he deals with evidence that would not favor it, is impressive.

Then Smith looked at the content, at what the letter said. In the letter, Clement is writing to a parishioner, Theodore, who has been told something by some Carpocratians. The Carpocratians are a group about whom we have little evidence. They were declared heretical early. What evidence we have about them seems to indicate that they were sexual libertarians, whatever that might have meant in the third century. The writer of the letter claims that what the Carpocratians said about the secret Gospel is not true. Then the letter writer quotes from the secret gospel. In it is the Lazarus story, which otherwise appears only in John. One of the differences between John's version and the secret gospel's version is that the secret gospel does not mention the name *Lazarus*. Jesus raises a "young man" from the dead. And then the secret gospel has something that is not in John's version of the story.

And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him wearing a linen cloth over [his] naked [body]. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup>

Provocative! If one considers this letter to be authentic, and Smith went about as far as any scholar could go in testing its authenticity, then it would seem to indicate that the Gospel of Mark that we have has been bowdlerized or that there is a lost expanded version of Mark. Certain things may have been taken out. Since it is the shortest of the Gospels, that might mean

<sup>9</sup> Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark*, Clearlake, CA, Dawn Horse Press, 1982, p. 17.

that it is incomplete. Also, the original ending of it ends on a note of fear: “And they [Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome] went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid” (Mk 16:8). Having three women who were close to Jesus being afraid seems an odd ending for a Gospel that is supposed to be “good news” about the resurrection of Jesus. This abrupt and incongruous ending led others to tack on other endings that they deemed more appropriate.

Smith then sees broad implications as the result of his find. He argues that Jesus was engaged in homosexual practices, as indicated by the passage from the secret gospel, that is, teaching “the mystery of the kingdom of heaven” has a sexual connotation. Smith compares the available information about the Carpocratians with the testimony of the secret gospel passage and suggests that the Carpocratians may have been carrying the true message of Jesus, which the Church expurgated from canonical texts in the third century. That may have been when Mark was bowdlerized of sexually explicit material or material that would indicate some kind of sexual freedom on Jesus’ part. It would have also been when the Carpocratians were declared heretical.

*Wilhelm Reich* (1897–1957). Smith was not the first to argue that Jesus was sexually active. Some have argued that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.<sup>10</sup> The psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, in his book *The Murder of Christ* argues that Jesus was in “organismic harmony” with “the God-given Life force.” Furthermore, according to Reich:

<sup>10</sup> ??



Christ could not possibly have been clean like brook water and sharp-sensed like a deer, had he been filled with the filth of perverted sex due to frustration of the natural embrace. There can be no doubt: *Christ knew love in the body and women as he knew so many other things natural.* Christ's benignity, his gleaming contactfulness, understanding of human frailty, of adulteresses, sinners, harlots, and the lowly in spirit, could not be possibly fit with any other biological picture of Christ. We know that women loved Christ—decent, beautiful, full-blooded women [emphasis in the original].<sup>11</sup>

It would seem that the claims of Jesus' sexuality are characteristic of a number of twentieth-century interpretations.

In addition, Smith gathered together information about Jesus not only from the Gospels and New Testament, but also the information from the enemies of Christianity. And much of their argument is based on the claim that Jesus was a magician; that is, he engaged in magical gimmicks. Smith compares the life of Jesus with another individual who lived in the first century A.D., Apollonius of Tyana. We have a biography of Apollonius that was written by one of his followers. It tells of events in Apollonius' life that bear a remarkable similarity with those of Jesus: both were itinerant miracle workers and preachers; both were rejected at first by people in their home town and by their brothers (although the brothers eventually became more favorable); both were accompanied by an inner circle of devoted disciples; both were credited with prophecies, exorcisms, cures, and an occasional raising of the dead; both, as preachers, made severe moral demands on their followers; both affected epigrammatic utterances, parables, and an oracular style; both taught as though they had some authority that had

<sup>11</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *The Murder of Christ*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966, p. 32.

been invested in them; both came into conflict with the established clergy of the temples they visited and tried to reform; and both were charged with sedition and magic. In addition, the legends surrounding both Apollonius and Jesus are similar: both were said to have been fathered by gods and to have been amazingly precocious youths; both at early stages in their careers went off into the wilderness and there encountered and worsted demons; at the end of their lives, Apollonius escaped miraculously from his trial, while Jesus, executed, rose miraculously from the dead; both then lived for some time with their disciples and were said finally to have ascended into heaven; both were credited with subsequent appearances, even to unbelievers; both were believed to be beings of supernatural powers by their followers, and accused of being magicians by their enemies. These parallels are so striking that one finds oneself asking: why did Christianity hold sway and not Apollonianism? Why are western societies predominantly Christian and not predominantly Apollonian, or Mithran, or some other religion deriving from another sect of that time?

#### Reasons for Christianity's Success

Christianity has a certain flexible character. I use the term guardedly because some people argue that it is not Christianity that borrowed from other religions of the time, but the other religions that borrowed from Christianity. It seems more likely to me that it is Christianity that did the borrowing. When it is necessary, the Church can accept ideas, rituals, and beliefs that seem on the surface, at least, to be totally antithetical to the teachings of the Church. The Church can also be extremely rigid, extremely strict within that area that it feels it controls. This flexibility began early. The Church does not object to popular holiday observances such as the Easter Bunny or to Easter eggs. It does not object to Santa Claus, or a yule (Christmas) tree. But each of these has pagan, non-Christian roots. In 1986, an American

priest had dared to say from the pulpit that there is no Santa Claus. He did not deny the existence of Saint Nicholas, just the present version of him as a bearded rotund jolly old elf in a red snow suit. He was called on the carpet by the Church authorities for denying the existence of Santa Claus. The Church would probably act in the same way if a priest dared to say there is no Easter bunny. Yet, where is it in the Bible or in Christian teaching that states the Easter bunny exists? What we find is that Christianity no matter what geographical area it moves into, makes allowances for the local customs and beliefs. It allows the Easter bunny to exist; it allows Santa Claus; it allows the cutting of the cake at marriage ceremonies. But it allows it as part of the overall structural customs.

#### Judaism

The main root of Christianity is Judaism as it had developed by the first century B.C./first century A.D. Much of our information about Judaism of this period has been augmented by discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Part of what the Dead Sea Scrolls testify to are conclusions that Biblical scholars by the 1940s had for the most part already come to about early Christianity and Judaism. Judaism at that time was undergoing some internal conflict, and had split into various factions. The Pharisees, for example, were a group that was looking for a political messiah, someone who would rescue the country from the Romans. When the Pharisees are questioning Jesus, it would seem that they were considering Jesus either as a potential savior or as a false savior. Some of the questioning tends to be rather critical. Jesus, on the other hand, may have been from a different group, the Essenes. The standard view is that the Essenes were the ones who wrote and copied down the Dead Sea Scrolls and hid them in the jars in the caves. They had more of a concept of a spiritual deliverance through repentance, asceticism, fasting, and some kind of mystical union with God. They formed what we would

call monastic groups, small communities in desert areas to practice their ascetic teaching. One of the groups of Essenes was called “The Poor,” because they believed that poverty was desirable. So that when Jesus said to the rich man, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mk 10:21; see also Mt 19:21), he may have been saying give your wealth not to the great unwashed but to this particular group of Essenes called “The Poor.” John the Baptist may have been an Essene evangelist, who proclaimed the coming of Jesus.

There are other views about the Dead Sea Scrolls. One view, expressed by Norman Golb (b. 1928), Professor in Jewish History and Civilization at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. He considers the ruins at Qumran to have been a fortress, not a monastic community. He has argued that the Essenes had no scriptoria in which to copy so many scrolls. Instead, Golb suggested that the scrolls were part of the library in Jerusalem. When the Romans came in A.D. 66 to destroy the temple, sections of the library were transported out of Jerusalem and hidden in different places in the countryside. One of these places was Qumran.<sup>12</sup> Thus, according to Golb, the Scrolls provide no insight into the Essene sect but do provide insight into general Jewish religious beliefs and practices of the first century A.D.

From Judaism, Christianity obtained its name for the deity. It obtained its cosmology, that is, its view of the universe, including the eschatology, the ends of the things. Christians obtained their concept of world history, which is focused on the history of the Hebrews. Throughout Christian history, the history of the Hebrews is constantly being referred to. Christianity borrows such Jewish ideas as the ten commandments and the concept of original

<sup>12</sup> See Norman Golb, “The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Perspective,” *American Scholar*, Spring, 1989, pp. 177–207.

sin, which was inflicted on humankind when Eve gave Adam the apple, thus, leading to their ouster from the Garden of Eden. Providence, the idea that God can intervene in our lives and change things, plays an important role in Christian doctrine. The Christians adopted on the idea, for example, that God punishes his chosen people because he loves them. In many Christian works, the phrase “He who God loves he punishes” appears frequently. It is an explanation for why bad things happen to good people. If you believe in the right deity, and he loves you, then why are horrible things happening to you? One answer may be that God is punishing you for your sins, like a father punishes a child. Christianity borrows these concepts from Judaism.<sup>13</sup>

#### Zoroastrianism

The Christian idea of otherworldliness seems to derive from Zoroastrianism, a religion that was prominent in the Persian Empire and still has its followers today. Zoroastrianism teaches that the world is the scene of a dramatic and constant struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The forces of good are led by Ahura Mazda (“wise lord”); the forces of evil are led by Angra Mainya (in modern Persian, Ahriman). The conflict is over men’s souls. The conflict will not continue forever; history will end. And the conflict will resolve itself, presumably on the side of good, as the present age of darkness gives way to the coming age of light. According to Zoroastrianism, history has gone through a number of stages: four or seven, depending on which account you believe. These stages represent progressively worsening periods. Soon things will get so bad that a tremendous eschatological cataclysm will take place and then at the last moment Good will finally demolish Evil, and the forces of truth

<sup>13</sup> See the recent book *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?*

and justice will prevail. Zoroastrianism represented a profound pessimism about the world contemporary to it. Things used to be much better, but we want to look ahead to the ultimate triumph. This concept of otherworldliness has an impact and it may be responsible for part of the message that Jesus was preaching. In Judaism, which does not discuss much what happens after you die, there is not a well-defined description of heaven and hell and the fate of the soul. The ideal is supposed to be one's leading one's life according to the law for the good of the "chosen people". And as a member of that "chosen people" one lives according to God's commandments. The Christian message is somewhat like this: Things may be really bad now. If, however, you lead a good life, then you will be rewarded in the afterlife, in the kingdom of heaven. And when the gospel of John has Jesus saying: "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36), it means, in effect, "Don't expect any relief from being oppressed in this world. Don't expect that you will ever be able to pay the bills by winning the lottery. It just won't happen in this world." The implication is that if you do win the lottery, it is probably as a result of a compact with evil forces. But if you give up your life, then afterward, your reward will come.

### Mithraism

Mithraism, another mystical cult of the time, was one of Christianity's competitors. The Roman emperor Aurelian (A.D. 270–275) declared Mithraism to be the official religion of the empire. According to tradition, a few shepherds came from a long distance to view Mithra's miraculous birth. Mithra also went through a struggle during his life, died, and was resurrected in heaven. Certain forms of Mithratic ritual were incorporated either directly or indirectly into Christianity, such as the practice of baptism. Dowsing water on someone to initiate them into the religion was a rite of the cult of Mithra and the use of holy water, in general,

was part of Mithratic practice. The Gospels describe John's baptizing Jesus (Mk 1:5,6; Mt 3:4–6). If we accept the speculation that John was of the Essene cult, then the argument is that the Essenes, or at least John's branch of the Essenes, picked up baptism from the cult of Mithra, from which it entered Christianity. The point is that the Jewish religion had no tradition of baptism with water, but Mithraism did. In addition, the idea of celebrating Sunday as the holy day may have come from Mithraism, since Mithra was the sun god and his day was Sunday. This is somewhat different from Jewish belief that Saturday is the holy day, because that is the seventh day. The first day is Sunday, and God, according to Genesis, rested on the seventh day, which would be Saturday. But the Christians adopted Sunday as their day of rest.

Christians celebrate the date of birth of Jesus on Christmas, yet, we do not have any evidence about the exact date Jesus was born. We can only guess about the year—sometime between 8 and 4 B.C. The month and day of Jesus' birth is completely arbitrary, but it is not accidental that the date selected was the same date given for the birth of Mithra—December 25. In addition, members of the Mithra cult took part in a symbolic eating of the flesh and blood of their god at a sacred banquet, similar to communion in a Christian church service.

### Gnosticism

The Gnostics believed in salvation through knowledge rather than through faith or good works. The Christian Gnostics thought of God in terms of Divine Wisdom (Sophia). From Gnosticism, Christianity adopted the concept of secret revelation, that an individual could have some direct communion with God and thus have a more or less direct understanding of God. This concept enters Christianity specifically with the Holy Ghost, which descends on true Christians. The Christian then has a mystical understanding of what Christianity is all about. One of the consequences of this concept, it turns out, is in the copying of manuscripts.

Those manuscripts that are copied by Jewish scribes tend to be fairly accurate. The Jewish scribes try to copy down exactly what is in their exemplar. In Judaism, one must not alter one single letter because literally the letter of the law is what is important. A Christian scribe is a bit more variable. His understanding of what Christianity is is internal, so that when he copies a manuscript, he can make a decision about whether what is there should really be there. The Christian scribe, as he was copying along, might say to himself: “Jesus couldn’t have said that, he must have said this.” Then he would write down something that was more in accord with his understanding of Christianity. Thus, we have all sorts of additions, deletions, and editings of the New Testament, which makes it a great source of study for textual critics who investigate these different versions that involved conscious changes on the part of the scribe.

### Stoicism

The Stoics believed in the idea that there is a brotherhood of humankind, a certain cosmopolitanism, avoiding the idea that any one people are inherently superior to any other people. The idea that all men and women are brothers and sisters comes from Stoicism. It enters Christianity rather late, in the third century A.D. along with other ideas from Greek philosophy in general, such as, the concept of the *logos*, the philosophical system of Neo-Platonism, the concept that the ideal exists somewhere beyond time and space, and that this world, which does exist in time and space, is only an imperfect manifestation of that ideal.

### Message of Jesus

The message of Jesus that we get out of the Gospels, insofar as we can determine as being Q, being the sayings of Jesus, if such a thing existed, is a message of an appeal to the poor and downtrodden. However, this message begins to have a different spin put on it by the early



Church as it sought to convert the wealthy, educated, pagan elite of the Roman Empire. For example, when Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God” (Mt 19:24, Mk 10:25), literally the message is: you can’t be rich and partake of the joys of God. The Church, of course, becomes extremely wealthy, and reinterprets that saying to mean that one can have wealth, that one can be as wealthy as one wants, just so long as one is not tied to that material wealth and to its acquisition. Here, for example, is the interpretation of these words by the Catholic Biblical Association in its *Commentary on the New Testament*:

It is very difficult for a rich man to save his soul; not that the possession of riches in itself is necessarily sinful, but riches are often unjustly acquired and therefore unjustly retained. They easily lead a man to commit sins of self-indulgence and, what is an important point in Christ’s teaching, the pursuit of the things of this world keeps a man from the whole-hearted service of God and induces a certain self-confidence that is opposed to the humble trust that we must have in God’s providence.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, according to the *Commentary*, instead of its being impossible (less possible than a camel’s going through the eye of a needle) for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God, it is only “very difficult.” Likewise, the *Commentary* has no problem with wealth per se: “not that the possession of riches in itself is necessarily sinful,” but with the acquisition of ill-gotten (“unjustly acquired”) wealth, which implies that there is such a thing as justly acquired wealth.

<sup>14</sup> *A Commentary on the New Testament*, prepared by The Catholic Biblical Association, 1942, p. 134.

Furthermore, according to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is supposed to have said:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. You have heard that it was said 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven (Mt. 5:38–45).

This is not a message that Jesus is sending to the Roman emperor. The Roman emperor does not love his enemies; he smashes and crushes them. Jesus is preaching to those who are being crushed. He is saying, in effect, that it's okay. It's okay to be oppressed because there is nothing you can do about it. What are you going to do? Rise up against the Roman army, which has just conquered all the Mediterranean lands, and which has major resources at its disposal? And you are never going to become wealthy either. So, what you have to do is accept that. If the Roman legions come in and they hit you over the head, do nothing. Love them and realize that your reward will come later, because "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). Don't worry, be happy, your time will come, but not in this world. It will come later.

In 1983, a Yale professor, Wayne A. Meeks published a rather intriguing study on "Who Were the First Christians?" He argued that the typical Christian of the first century A.D. was someone who was upwardly mobile, an artisan or a craftsman, that is, someone who was

urban based, in effect, a yuppie.<sup>15</sup> I thought this was an appropriate theory for the 1980's. The treatment of Jesus and the treatment of early Christianity in the historiography is somewhat similar to the treatment of what happened to the Roman Empire, only in reverse. Whatever is bad in one's society one tends to see as a cause for the fall of the Roman Empire; whatever is good one tends to see as a contributing factor to the rise of Christianity. In the 1960's, when the hippies were around, somebody wrote to one of the religious journals and said that he had been reading about Jesus and had seen pictures of the way he was supposed to have dressed. In those pictures, he looks like a hippy: long hair, sandals, beard; he doesn't seem to have a job. And the question was: if Jesus came back today, would he not come back as a hippy? The editor of the journal responded that Jesus was just dressing in the style that was typical for his day. And, furthermore, if Jesus came back today, he would be dressed like a businessman with a three-piece suit.

I decided to suppress my suspicions and read through the rest of Meeks' study. His argument is not as strong as the impression of it. He took the letters of Paul and discerns that there are sixty-five people named in the letters. Then, he tried to analyze each of these in its context to see what was the social status of this person. Time after time, he comes to the conclusion that the person had some wealth. Of course, he does not indicate how much wealth. "Some wealth" does not mean wealthy, but it also does not mean a little wealth or even more than a little wealth. If I had a nickel in my pocket, I would have a little wealth; not much but a little. So, it is difficult to determine from his argument how wealthy these early Christians are. Also, he seems to equate wealth with literacy, which automatically skews things a bit because

<sup>15</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983.

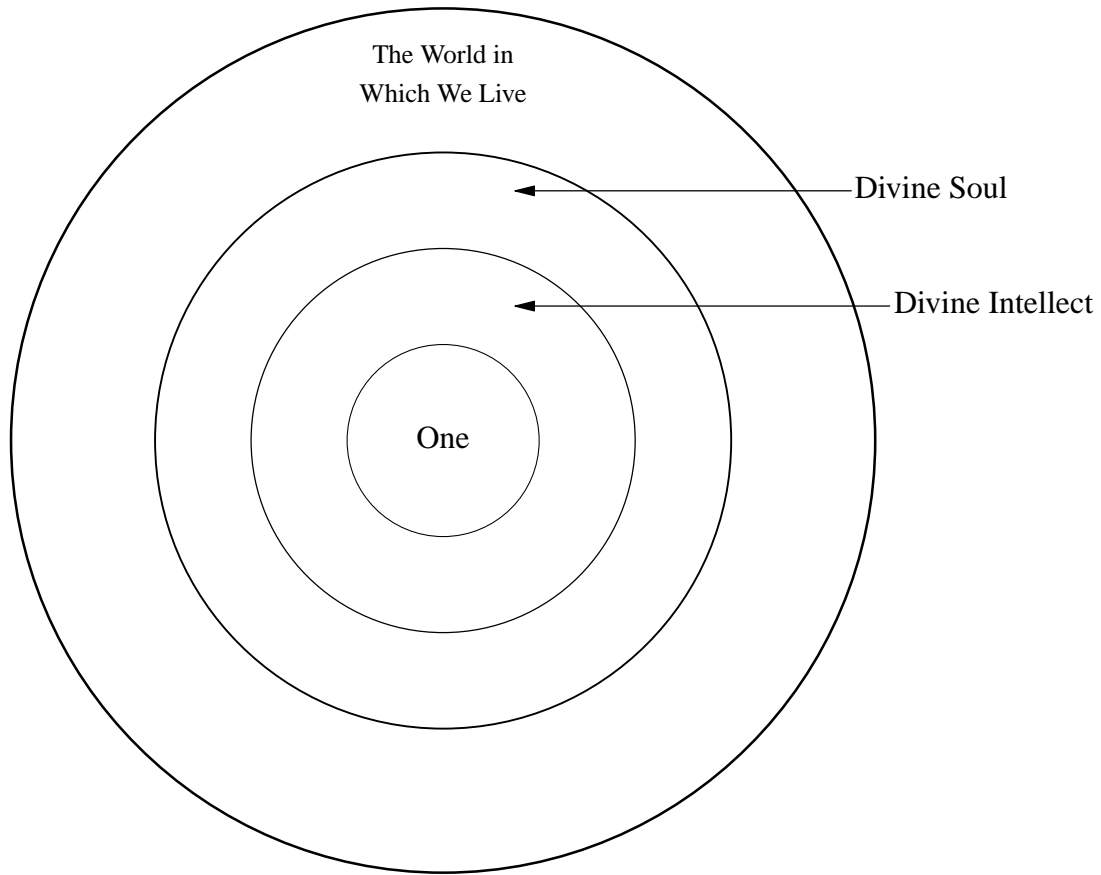
Paul would not be writing to an illiterate person. Therefore, by definition, it would seem that those who received the letters were educated, and therefore they must have had some wealth to be educated. The problem is that in the ancient world many educated people had no wealth at all. Many of the tutors were slaves who could not own wealth. In addition, Meeks goes on, a number of the people had Roman sounding names. And since they had Roman sounding names, they must have been Roman citizens, and therefore, they must have had some wealth. Roman citizenship, however, does not necessarily mean wealth. It is a matter of social status under the law, not a sign of wealth. Other things, such as ability to travel, setting up households, and eating meat, he equates with wealth. That is a tricky equation. Anyone who raises sheep would eat meat; it does not mean that they bought it in the market place. Slave owners he equates with wealth. This is also a difficult equation. The distinction between a slaveowner and a slave was often a legal distinction, not an economic one. The slaves were often living at the same standard of living as their owners. They were eating the same food, living in the same place, dressing the same way. It is difficult to conclude that the people who read these writings were necessarily wealthier than the general population. At the end of his study, Meeks asks first, "Are there some specific characteristics of early Christianity that would be attractive to status-inconsistencies?" That is, are there people who are attracted to Christianity because they are of a certain class status? He does not answer that, but then he goes on to ask: "Or is it only that people with the sorts of drive, abilities, and opportunities that produced such mixed status would tend to stand out in any group they joined, and thus to be noticed for the record?" In other words, precisely because they are upwardly mobile, they are not typical Christians. They are rather atypical and they stand out only because they are so unusual.

From the message that we get in the Gospels, it would appear that the first Christians were not wealthy. Christianity also seems to have had an appeal to women, because many of the people talked about in Paul's letters are women. Some of them appear to be rather independent, that is, they support themselves in some way without a husband. This indicates one of the advantages that early Christianity had over many other religions of the times: it admitted women and gave them full rights of participation in worship. Mithraism, for example, excluded them. It has been suggested that the Gospel of Luke may have been written by a woman. That Gospel, in contrast to the others, seems to devote more of its attention to women, to their doings and to their status. And it is not inconceivable that a woman was its author.

### Neoplatonism

What I am about to tell you may be the single most important concept for understanding Western intellectual thought. I am not exaggerating. Much of Western intellectual thought can best be understood in the context of Neoplatonism, and is one of the reasons why Alfred North Whitehead could say that Western philosophy is merely a series of footnotes to Plato. Plotinus (A.D. 205–270) was a Greek philosopher who was not a Christian but who formulated a system of thought that was easily carried over into Christianity. What I am presenting here is a simplified version of Plotinus' views. Plotinus, being a Platonist, thought that this world, the world in which we live, is a shadowy world, an imperfect representation of the real, perfect, and ideal world that exists elsewhere, beyond time and space. The idea is that the essences of things are somehow separate from the things themselves. For example, consider two beautiful things. These two things share a common essence, which is the essence of beauty, which is common to all beautiful things. But that beauty, that idea, is something that

these objects are imbued with. Beauty can be disembued or detached from them, for beauty exists separately as a pure intellectual concept. The other view is that beauty as such does not exist separately from the objects themselves, and that the concept beauty is merely a concept in our own minds as to what constitutes beauty. Plotinus equated Plato's "real" world, where the perfect chair, the perfect classroom, the perfect teacher exists with something he called the "One." The One always has to be spelled out; it cannot be digitized. In the Neoplatonic view, the One is the source of all essences, of all beauty, of all love, of all truth, of all kindness. The One is all perfect. The One is also unknowable. The One is a thing-unto-itself, which we cannot possibly comprehend because of our imperfect minds. Emanating from the One is something he called the divine mind. Emanating from the divine mind is the divine soul. And then, emanating from the divine soul is the world in which we live. Beyond that is non-existence (see diagram).



Aspects of the divine soul are in each one of us, in our own souls. Here we are in the world in which we live on the edge of non-existence. We are imperfect; we have many flaws. But each of us has a connection with the divine soul because there is a spark of the divine soul within us. Like fingers on hand, our souls are separate from each other but connected with the palm of the divine soul. Christian writers of the third century and fourth century A.D. took over this concept. It was easy to place God in the position of the One, so that emanating from God is the divine intellect while the divine soul still acts as an intermediary between the divine intellect and the world in which we live. We can have an understanding of the divine soul through the understanding of our own soul. But we cannot have an understanding of the divine soul through the world in which we live, because the world in which we live is a world of deception. The imperfections of this world can lead us astray.

#### Augustine, Bishop of Hippo

When Augustine of Hippo was writing his *Confessions*, he was concerned about the question of evil. Why must children suffer? If God is all-good and all-love and all-caring, why does he allow such things to happen? Augustine went through an internal struggle to understand what evil was. One explanation, which Augustine entertained, was that the Devil was the source of evil. Thus, in this view, there is a conflict between God and the Devil over the souls of humankind. It is much like Zoroastrianism with a conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Indeed, there is a group in early Christianity called the Manicheans who propagate this idea. Mani, after whom Manicheanism is named, was a third or fourth century religious thinker who tried to combine the major religions known to him, including Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism.



In the movie “Oh, God You Devil,” George Burns plays the roles of both God and Devil. This idea is a Manichean interpretation of the world. At one point in the movie God and the Devil play a hand of poker for the soul of a man who had signed a contract with the Devil. This is Manicheanism, pure and simple. But Augustine found this concept insufficient because he could not understand why God would allow the Devil to exist. Instead, after adopting the Neoplatonic view, Augustine came to the conclusion that evil is not a separate essence unto itself. In the One there is not the idea of evil as such. Pure evil does not exist in the One because the One is the source of love and goodness. Instead, evil is the absence of the One, the absence of God. As you move further away from the One, through the divine mind, through the divine soul, through the shadowy world in which we live, you move toward non-existence or ultimate evil, the absence of all essences. Official Church doctrine does not accept the concept of a Devil, that is, another supernatural being in conflict with God. You cannot have more than one supernatural being in a monotheistic religion unless it is part of the Godhead, like the father, the son, and the holy ghost. No Devil there, so the Devil cannot exist as a separate being within Catholic Church theology. Then the question is: does evil come from God? Well, this is the Jewish concept. All good and all evil originate from God. The Christian concept does not recognize God as the source of evil. This is the conclusion that Augustine comes to. And it is still the official doctrine of the Catholic Church. Evil is the absence of God, thus evil is the absence of the good. Evil is the ultimate imperfection. In the scale between total perfection to total imperfection man is very close to total imperfection, non-existence. But humankind has a choice. If we decide to follow our own will, and do things for ourselves, that is going to lead to non-existence; we lose our souls. However, God gently is drawing us toward him, leaving us little clues as to what he wants us to do. If we give our lives and souls up to God, then we move away from evil and toward the good. And

this was what Augustine felt had happened to him.

### The Transformation of Christianity

In the third century A.D., Christian Church leaders seem to have made a conscious decision to try to convert pagan aristocrats to Christianity. Our sources from the second and third centuries indicate an on-going debate between Christian writers and pagan philosophers. During this period, we find such arguments developing that Homer borrowed many of his ideas from the Old Testament. There are some similarities in concepts, but most of these can be set down to similar background rather than to a direct borrowing, either Homer from the Old Testament or the Old Testament from Homer. The likelihood is that the Old Testament was written down after Homer lived, so it would have been difficult for Homer to borrow from the Old Testament. The idea behind the argument is to show that Christianity is superior to pagan religions. The earliest Christian documents reflect little of the intellectual values of the educated mentality of the Greco-Roman world. Converts and second-century apologists attempted to prove the absurdity of polytheism and the immorality of Greek mythology. They attempted to provide concrete examples aimed at countering the objection that the Christian religion was a recent invention. Thus, the argument is formulated that the Old Testament precedes the Greek poets, and that the Greek poets and philosophers plagiarized from it. However, Christianity also adopts certain concepts from the pagan philosophers, certain philosophical ways of argument. One of these is neo-platonism.

### The Conversion of Constantine the Great

Perhaps the most important event in early Christianity was the conversion of Constantine the Great. The reason is that Constantine was the first of the Roman emperors to declare Christianity to be a favored religion within the Empire. It could then no longer be subject to

persecution. He seems to have been rather cautious about this, perhaps because of strong opposition. He himself did not convert to Christianity until shortly before his death. Also, he did not establish Christianity as the state religion. That occurred later in A.D. 381 under Emperor Theodosius. Instead, Constantine excluded Christianity from those religions subject to persecution. This had a tremendous impact on its development, for it meant that it was now okay to be Christian. You did not have to worry that if you were going to convert to Christianity that you would hear the knock on the door, and the next thing you would know you would be driven off to the Coliseum to be eaten by the lions. It meant that the pagan aristocracy could feel safe if it chose to convert. One of the issues that historians argue about is, why did Constantine convert to Christianity, or at least why did he give it favored religion status? We do not have a definitive answer. The earliest sources seem to indicate some kind of miracle, a commonplace occurrence with such conversions. Paul, for example, was knocked off his horse and was spoken to by a blinding light. In 496, Clovis, king of the Franks, defeated the Alemanni in battle when he cried out,

Jesus Christ, who art according to Clotilde [his wife] the Son of the living God, who art said to give aid to those in trouble and victory to those who hope in Thee .... I beseech Thee ... if Thou wilt give me victory over mine enemies I will believe in Thee and be baptized in Thy name. I have called upon my gods and they are far removed from helping me. Hence I believe they are powerless, since they do not succour their followers. I now call upon Thee. Only save me from mine enemies.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *The Medieval Church*, ed. Roland H. Bainton, Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1962, p. 99??

Likewise, in one of the three stories found in the Rus' Primary Chronicle, Volodimir, the prince of Kiev is about to marry Anna, the sister of the co-emperors of Constantinople, in 988, when he is afflicted with blindness. Anna tells him to be baptized at once and the blindness will be cured:

When Volodimir heard her messages, he said, 'If this proves true, then of a surety is the God of the Christians great,' and he gave order that he should be baptized. The Bishop of Kherson, together with the Princess' priests, after announcing the tidings, baptized Volodimir, and as the Bishop laid his hand upon him, he straightway received his sight. Upon experiencing this miraculous cure, Volodimir glorified God, saying, 'I have now perceived the one true God.'<sup>17</sup>

The miracle that was involved in Constantine's conversion was described by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, in his *History of the Church*. Eusebius was a contemporary of Constantine and he claims that Constantine told him the story years after it happened. According to Eusebius, Constantine was on his way to do battle against Maxentius for control of the Empire. The day before the battle he, Constantine, sees a cross either over the sun or above the sun, and beside the cross are the Latin words, "*Hoc vince*" (By this conquer). Constantine does not understand what this meant. He is rather slow, and the other information we have about him is that he was raised in an army camp, which was not the most sophisticated place of learning theological concepts. He asks the other people in his entourage, among whom are some Christian priests, who tell him that this is a sign from God, and this is the sign of the cross representing Christianity. That night Constantine has a dream. A man comes to Constantine and tells him

<sup>17</sup> *Povest' vremennyh let* (988).

to put the sign of the cross on the shields and helmets of his soldiers. The cross that Constantine eventually put on was not the cross that we are familiar with. It was not this cross:

[figure]

but this:

[figure]

This are the Greek letters X (chi) and P (rho), which are the first two letters in the Greek spelling of Christ's name, Χριστός. Again, Constantine does not understand what the dream is all about, so he asks the priests. They tell him that this man who came to you in the middle of the night was Jesus, and he is telling you to put this sign on the shields and helmets of your soldiers for the battle. Constantine put the chi-rho sign onto the shields and helmets of his soldiers and he wins the battle at Milvian Bridge, and Christianity triumphs. But what do we make of this? There is another account of Constantine's vision. An aide-de-camp by the name of Lactantius describes this vision of seeing a cross over or above the sun, but he does not place it the day before the Battle of Milvian Bridge, as Eusebius says Constantine told him. Instead, he places it about four or five years earlier in Gaul when Constantine is on his way to do battle against some barbarian tribes. In the description by Lactantius, the words "By this, conquer," do not appear. How do we correlate these two descriptions. Did Constantine see two visions? Did he in later life confuse the two visions and think that the earlier vision occurred the day before the battle with Maxentius? Or did Eusebius collate a description that Constantine was telling about a battle in 308, and place it mistakenly before

the later battle. We do not know.

Eusebius story is rather odd, and historians have tried to find other explanations. Gibbon, for example, has suggested a more mundane explanation. In the army of Constantine were a number of Christian soldiers, who were not sure that they wanted to fight for Constantine. They were concerned that if Constantine won, persecutions of Christians would still continue. Therefore, according to Gibbon, they worked out a deal. Constantine, to show his soldiers that there would be toleration for Christians had them put this sign on their shields and helmets.<sup>18</sup> Peter Brown has argued that since Constantine was raised in the army, and spoke a rather uncultured Latin, he was seeking in his toleration of Christians to gain acceptance from the more cultured elements of the society.<sup>19</sup>

One thing puzzling about the message of Christianity as given in the Gospels was a message of acceptance of oppression (“Turn the other cheek” “Love your enemies”). These are not the words that a soldier would live by. A soldier is not supposed to love his enemies. Yet, by the early third century, a fairly large number of Christians (we do not know how many) were soldiers. It has been estimated that maybe ten or twenty percent of Constantine’s army was made up of Christians. We think we know that Constantine’s mother, Helen, was Christian, but his father was pagan. Constantine seems to have followed a parallel course with Augustine in that he followed pagan beliefs for a while, then in later life turned to Christianity. But is the fact that his mother is Christian a sufficient explanation? And why is he putting the chi-rho on the shields and helmets of his soldiers before he himself has converted to

<sup>18</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, 4th ed., Methuen, 1908, p. ??.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity AD 150–750*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1971, p. ??.

Christianity?

*Transformation in Christian Attitudes toward War.* According to C. John Cadoux, the change in Christian attitudes toward war was a gradual one.<sup>20</sup> It occurred sometime in the first three centuries of the Christian era.

His argument is that much of this transformation of Christianity from an acceptance of the downtrodden in life to being a more militant religion derives from the rhetoric of Paul. Paul, for example, in a letter to the Thessalonians urges them to “put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thes. 5:8). In a letter to the Corinthians, he defends his right to subsist at the Church’s expense by asking: “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?” (1 Cor. 9:7). Remember, this was after the reforms of Marius when soldiers began receiving a salary. Paul spoke of his having the “weapons of righteousness on the right hand and on the left ...” (2 Cor. 6:7). Other aspects of early Christianity harken back to military life. The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin word “sacramentum,” which meant a soldier’s oath. The word “pagan” derives from a Latin word “paganus,” which originally meant civilian as distinct from a soldier, at least until A.D. 300. Thus, non-Christians were associated with pagans or civilians, while Christians were associated with being soldiers, but not yet military soldiers, merely soldiers in Christ. The modern equivalent to this concept is the song “Onward Christian soldiers.” If you are confirmed in the Catholic Church, you are confirmed a soldier in Christ. Eventually, according to Cadoux, the concept of spiritual weapons transformed into worldly weapons. Christians accepted the Old Testament, and in the Old Testament is the sanction of warfare. In the Apocalypse, Christ is represented as a

<sup>20</sup> C. John Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (London: Headley Bros, 1919).

conquerer, having a two-edged sword issuing from his mouth. He threatens to make war and to slay Jezebel's children. A tremendous conflict will occur. It is said he will conquer the beasts and the kings of the Earth with terrific slaughter. After that there will be wars against God and Magog. Then the quick and the dead will be judged.

In the Gospels, Jesus is supposed to have said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." This passage may be open to differing interpretations. It would seem to argue against the views of those, like S. G. F. Brandon, who want to see Jesus as a political insurrectionary. While it would seem to indicate that one should not rebel against the state, it does not explicitly say that one should embrace the state either. The Church, in its interpretation, chose to accept a more active understanding of those words, that is, that Christianity should embrace the state and that the state is necessary and Christians should support the state. The Church adopted the view that the state was a useful and necessary institution, ordained by God for the security of life and property, and to maintain law and order. According to this view, civil government was ordained by God for the purpose of restraining, by means of coercion and penalty, the grosser forms of sin. In other words, one cannot have a religion without the state.

Eventually, as the Church during the third century was seeking converts, inevitably the question was most likely raised: could a soldier become a Christian and remain in his profession? In the third century, the answer was yes, because soldiers were seen as necessary to defend the state. Then the question became: could a Christian become a soldier? That is, could someone who was already a Christian adopt the military life as a profession? Since there were already soldiers who were Christians, why not have Christians who would become soldiers. So, the answer to that question, too, was yes. In this way, the Roman army seems have harbored Christians, whether or not they were closet Christians, or more correctly since



they did not have closets then, cryptic Christians. The reason Christian soldiers might remain in the “closet” is the persecutions against Christians carried on as late as 305 A.D. in the West. If Constantine had priests in his entourage, as Eusebius relates, then it seems to me that they were there for a reason, which would have been to administer to soldiers in Constantine’s army who were Christians. Yet, there was one more question to be asked. If you are a soldier and you meet a Christian in the opposing army, are you allowed to kill him? It was not so much a problem of killing a pagan, but killing another Christian may have been an issue that was not resolved. Constantine, by putting the chi-rho on the shields and helmets of his men, may have been introducing a tactical maneuver. If there were Christians in Constantine’s army, then there were probably Christians in Maxentius’ army too. As the two armies drew together, the Christians in Maxentius’ army may have seen the sign on the shields and helmets of Constantine’s men, and hesitated, recognizing it as a Christian sign. That hesitation would have given Constantine’s army the advantage it needed to gain victory.

All this is speculative. The information is rather sparse, and the evidence is contradictory. We do not even have agreement on what year the Battle of Milvian Bridge was in, either 311 or 312.<sup>21</sup> It seems to me that much more can be said about this extremely important event in the history of early Christianity. Without the victory at Milvian Bridge, Constantine would not have become emperor. If he had not become emperor, then he would not have issued an edict of toleration for all religions, thus ending the persecutions of Christians throughout the Empire. On the other hand, since his predecessor Galerius had issued such an edict in 311, then perhaps religious toleration was an idea whose time had come. Yet, Constantine

<sup>21</sup> See the arguments of Patrick Bruun, “The Battle of the Milvian Bridge: The Date Reconsidered,” *Hermes*, vol. 88, 1960, pp. 361–370.

apparently converted to Christianity late in life, and every subsequent emperor (except for Julian) is Christian. The reason I am suggesting that Constantine's putting the chi-rho on the shields and helmets of his men helped him win the battle is that I am dissatisfied with all the other explanations of the meaning and significance of this act. If we are not willing to accept Eusebius' account at face value, there still may be some reality behind the myth Eusebius tries to create. Eusebius, in his account, goes out of his way to indicate that Constantine related the story to him directly. Given there may have been conflation of stories, and misrememberings, the essential parts are that Constantine saw a vision associated with the sun, put a sign on the shields and helmets of his men, and won the battle. We know that early Christian prelates were in the habit of interpreting natural phenomena as an allegory for the Christian message. The red of a rose represented the blood of Christ. The dogwood tree, which has blossoms shaped like a cross, was the wood that the cross that Jesus was crucified on was made of, and so forth. It would not be out of the question for the priests in Constantine's entourage to interpret an atmospheric phenomenon, the reflection by ice crystals of the sun's rays to create the impression of a cross or a chi-rho, which could be interpreted as the first two letters of  $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$  in Greek. The key to such a speculation is whether or not having that sign on the shields and helmets of the soldiers in Constantine's army would have been interpreted by the Christians in Maxentius' army the same way, as a Christian symbol. There is no way of telling this, nor do we have evidence that the chi-rho had this meaning before the Battle of Milvian Bridge. We have much evidence that it had this meaning afterward. But that is insufficient to raise such a suggestion beyond the level of pure speculation.