unpleasant detail in the books of the Maccabees. Or one might mention the unrest in Alexandria in A.D. 38, when pagan mobs installed idols of the "divine" Caligula in the city's synagogues, Jews were stripped of their municipal citizenship and forced to retreat into a sequestered quarter of the city, hundreds of Jewish homes were destroyed, and Jews who ventured out of their ghetto were murdered or beaten in the streets. Or—not to disdain the obvious—one might just want to mention the persecutions of Christians under various Roman emperors. These last were certainly inspired by more than mere political pragmatism; they were expressions of a great deal of pagan religious sentiment, and were often prompted by unambiguously religious motives. In Alexandria, for instance, late in 248 or early in 249, before the imperial edicts of late 249 that inaugurated the Decian persecutions, there was an eruption of violence against the city's Christians apparently initiated by a pagan "prophet." And the last and most savage of the imperial persecutions were instigated, at least in part, by the words of a god: Diocletian, so the story goes, was told by the prophet of Apollo in Didyma that the great number of "the Just in the earth"—meaning the empire's Christians—had made it difficult to obtain the god's oracles, which convinced the emperor to issue a series of decrees for the spiritual purification of his dominions. One could go on, but suffice it to say that large generalizations about the relative "tolerance" of monotheism and polytheism are best avoided. At different times and in different places, Jews and pagans persecuted Christians, pagans persecuted Christians and Jews, and Christians persecuted Jews and pagans; in fact, pagans persecuted other pagans, Jews other Jews, and Christians other Christians (and, of course, in the modern period certain atheists proved themselves by far the most ambitious, murderous, and prolific persecutors of all—but that is neither here nor there).

In another sense, though, the critics are right: in many notable respects, pagan religious culture was immeasurably more "tolerant" than Christianity ever was—indeed, it could tolerate just about anything. Admittedly, many of the more spectacular depravities of pagan cult, such as human sacrifice, were actively discouraged by Rome wherever it encountered them, whether in northern Europe, Asia Minor, North Africa, Gaul, or even Italy. As early as 97 B.C., in fact, the Senate had made such sacrifices a crime. But ancient traditions do not vanish easily; as late as the time of the emperor Hadrian (A.D. 76–138) it was still necessary to

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pass laws forbidding the oblation of human victims, in order to suppress certain local festal customs (such as, perhaps, the yearly immolation of a single man to the Cyprian Jupiter at Salamis). In a larger sense, though, human sacrifice of a sort—or, at any rate, its logic—was never entirely absent from Roman religious culture. Whether or not one should credit dubious tales of human lives offered up to the gods, on very special occasions, by emperors as conservative as Augustus or as degenerate as Commodus (A.D. 161–192)—rather more plausible in the latter case than in the former, one would think—it was always the case that the sacred order of Roman society was nourished and sustained by certain acceptable forms of human sacrifice. The execution of a criminal, for example, was often quite explicitly an offering made to the god against whose laws the criminal had offended (hence Julius Caesar, in 46 B.C., could understand his execution of two mutinous soldiers as a sacrifice to Mars). And surely there was no grander sacrificial spectacle, and no more satisfying celebration of sacred order, than the entertainments provided during lunch on game days in the arena, between the morning's slaughter of wild beasts and the afternoon's gladiatorial matches, when condemned criminals of the lower classes, slaves, or foreign prisoners were executed by crucifixion, torture, or burning, or were committed to the mercy of wild animals. For that matter, the gladiatorial competitions themselves were originally understood as *munera mortis,* tributes paid to the manes, the spirits of the dead. And, of course, there are some forms of "human sacrifice" that require an offering different from—but not necessarily any less grave than—the victim's life, such as the ecstatic self-castration and regular self-mutilation required of the priests of the Anatolian Great Mother, Cybele, or of the "Syrian Goddess" Atargatis. Examples are numberless.

Quite apart from their more revolting ritual observances, however, the religions of the empire were—to a very great degree—contemptible principally for what they did not do, and what in fact they never considered worth doing. Occasional attempts have been made by scholars in recent years to suggest that the paganism of the late empire was marked by a kind of "philanthropy" comparable in kind, or even in scope, to the charity practiced by the Christians, but nothing could be further from the truth (as I discuss below). Pagan cult was never more tolerant than in its tolerance—without any qualms of conscience—of poverty, disease, starvation, and homelessness; of gladiatorial spectacle, crucifixion, the exposure of

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unwanted infants, or the public slaughter of war captives or criminals on festive occasions; of, indeed, almost every imaginable form of tyranny, injustice, depravity, or cruelty. The indigenous sects of the Roman world simply made no connection between religious piety and anything resembling a developed social morality. At their best, their benignity might extend as far as providing hostelry for pilgrims or sharing sacrificial meats with their devotees; as a rule, however, even these meager services were rare and occasional in nature, and never amounted to anything like a religious obligation to care for the suffering, feed the hungry, or visit prisoners. Nor did the authority of the sacred, in pagan society, serve in any way to mitigate the brutality of the larger society—quite the contrary, really—and it would be difficult to exaggerate that brutality. To take an example more or less at random (one I choose, I have to say, only because reading about it affected me so forcibly when I was a boy): Tacitus relates the tale of the murder of Pedanius Secundus in A.D. 61 by one of his own slaves, which brought into effect the ancient custom that in such cases all the slaves of the household should be put to death—a custom that meant, on this occasion, the execution of approximately four hundred men, women, and children. There was, commendably enough, considerable public protest against the killing of so many innocents, but the Senate concluded that the ancient ways must be honored, if only for the example the slaughter would set, and nowhere in the course of the debate, it appears, was any concept of divine justice or spiritual virtue invoked.[5] That might seem a rather irrelevant anecdote here, admittedly, but the points to note are that the social order that the imperial cults sustained and served was one that rested, not accidentally but essentially, upon a pervasive, relentless, and polymorphous cruelty, and that to rebel against those cults was to rebel also against that order.

This, above all, must be remembered when assessing the relative openness or exclusivity of ancient creeds. We may recall with palpable throbs of fond emotion how the noble Symmachus pleaded for a greater toleration of pagan practices, and we may generally be disposed to endorse his view that the roads to truth are many; but we would do well to avoid excessive sentimentality all the same. We should remember not only that his broad "tolerance" involved imposing the cult of Victory upon Christian senators but also that his religious perspective was one almost entirely devoid of any discernibly ethical angles. This was the same man, after all,

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who complained of having been, as it were, defrauded of an enormous sum he had spent on public entertainments when twenty-nine of the Saxon prisoners he had purchased for the arena killed themselves before they could be made to perform.[6] I do not wish to make any exorbitant claims for the record of institutional Christianity in ameliorating the society to which it found itself attached; indeed, I cannot. If, for instance, it is true that, as Theodoret of Cyrus (c. 393–c. 457) reports, the emperor Honorius (384–423) finally brought an end to gladiatorial combat only in 404, and then only after a monk had been killed by spectators at an arena when he had attempted to bring the battle to a halt, that would mean that such games persisted for more than a decade after the empire had become officially Christian, and nearly ninety years after Constantine had first attempted to make them illegal.[7] That said, it was, after all, a monk whose death brought this change about, and it was only because such spectacles were by their nature repellant to Christian faith, and contrary to the laws of the church, that they were finally brought to an end. This in itself marks a vast and irreconcilable difference (and necessary antagonism) between the moral sensibilities of Christianity and those of the religions it displaced. It should probably neither surprise nor particularly disturb us, then, to discover that Christians of the late fourth century were not very inclined to agree with Symmachus that all religious paths led toward the same truth, given that one could walk so many of those paths quite successfully without ever turning aside to bind up the wounds of a suffering stranger, and without even pausing in alarm before unwanted babies left to be devoured by wild beasts, or before the atrocities of the arena, or before mass executions. If, as Christians believed, God had revealed himself as omnipotent love, and if true obedience to God required a life of moral heroism, in service to even "the least of these," how should Christians have viewed the religious life of most pagans if not as a rather obscene coincidence of spiritual servility and moral callousness? And how should they have viewed the gods from whose power Christ had liberated them if not as spirits of strife, ignorance, chaos, fate, and elemental violence, whose cults and devotions were far beneath the dignity of creatures fashioned in the divine image?

When all is said and done, we shall understand very little about the Christianization of the Roman Empire if we approach it simply as the story of one set of spiritual devotions—on account of their intransigent

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and unreasoning "exclusivity"—replacing other sets of spiritual devotions, or if we simply imagine (as modern persons are particularly prone to do) that religion is by definition a matter of "private" conviction, rather than a cultural, social, spiritual, and political order of values, authorities, and ideals. Christianity was, quite unambiguously, a cosmic sedition. It may have been partially subdued by the empire in being officially embraced, but even so its ultimate triumph resulted not merely in the supplantation of one cult by another, or even of one kind of mythic consciousness by another, but in the invention of an entirely new universe of human possibilities, moral, social, intellectual, cultural, and religious. And whether these new potentialities reached fruition at once or only over the course of centuries, they would never have opened up within human experience at all had not the old order passed away, and had not the gods who presided over it, endowed it with a sort of spiritual glamor, and lent it mythic form and structure been reduced to a newly subordinate status. The old and the new faiths represented two essentially incompatible visions of sacred order and of the human good. They could not coexist indefinitely, and only a moral imbecile could unreservedly regret which of the two it was that survived. The old gods did not—and by their nature could not—inspire the building of hospitals and almshouses, or make feeding the hungry and clothing the naked a path of spiritual enlightenment, or foster any coherent concept of a dignity intrinsic to every human soul; they could never have taught their human charges to think of charity as the highest of virtues or as the way to union with the divine.

It is, I might add, discourteous to reproach the oppressed for failing to honor their oppressors. Former slaves are under no particular obligation to feel indulgent toward their erstwhile masters. When considering the record of early Christianity's "intolerance"—when recalling those exorcisms in that baptistery on Easter eve (to return to the point from which I set out)—one should also remember that the Christians of the empire were not some foreign tribe who arrived in the pagan world one long afternoon, laden with swords and colonialist prejudices, and then set about systematically eradicating the aboriginal religions of an alien people. The gods they rejected had been their gods too, their masters of old. If they came to find those gods unworthy of reverence, and the cults of those gods inherently irreconcilable with whatever the story of Christ had awakened within them, it would be rather presumptuous of us to reprehend them

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spread nearly so far or so swiftly but for the great number of women in its fold.

This should not really surprise us. Whether women of great privilege would have gained much by association with the Galilaeans can no doubt be debated, but there can be little question regarding the benefits that the new faith conferred upon ordinary women—women, that is, who were neither rich nor socially exalted—literally from birth to death. Christianity both forbade the ancient pagan practice of the exposure of unwanted infants—which is almost certainly to say, in the great majority of cases, girls—and insisted upon communal provision for the needs of widows—than whom no class of persons in ancient society was typically more disadvantaged or helpless. Not only did the church demand that females be allowed, no less than males, to live; it provided the means for them to live out the full span of their lives with dignity and material security. Christian husbands, moreover, could not force their wives to submit to abortions or to consent to infanticide; and while many pagan women may have been perfectly content to commit their newborn daughters to rubbish heaps or deserted roadsides, to become carrion for dogs and birds or (if fortunate) to become foundlings, we can assume a very great many women were not. Christian husbands were even commanded to remain as faithful to their wives as they expected their wives to be to them; they were forbidden to treat their wives with cruelty; they could not abandon or divorce their wives; their wives were not their chattels but their sisters in Christ. One might even argue that the virtues that Christianity chiefly valued—compassion, humility, gentleness, and so forth—were virtues in which women had generally had better training; and that it was for this reason, perhaps, that among Christians female piety was often so powerful a model of the purity of their faith. Even in the latter half of the fourth century, Christian men as prominent as Basil of Caesarea and his brother Gregory of Nyssa could look to their brilliant and pious sister Macrina as a kind of ideal of the Christian life.[14] That ancient Christians were not modern persons, and so could not yet conceive of a society in which men and women occupied the same professions or positions, is both obvious and utterly undeserving of reproach. The "social technology" of perfect sexual equality—or, at any rate, equivalence—was as far beyond their resources as was the material technology of electric light. But Christians had been instructed by Paul that a man's body belonged

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to his wife no less than her body belonged to him, and that in Christ a difference in dignity between male and female did not exist. And while it would be silly to imagine that the women who converted to Christianity in the early centuries had first calculated the possible social benefits of such an act, it would be just as foolish to deny that Christian beliefs had real consequences for how women fared in the Christian community, or to imagine that Christian women were entirely unconscious of the degree to which their faith affirmed their humanity.

It should also probably not go unremarked that the legal reforms instituted by a number of Christian emperors, in their attempts to bring the law into closer conformity with the precepts of their faith, betray a solicitude for the welfare and rights of women often absent from pagan legislation. Constantine's efforts in this regard, while not as radical as they might have been, and not always particularly consistent, certainly eased the hardships of widows, shielded women from prosecution in public, forbade divorce on trivial grounds, made public accusations of adultery against women illegal, and protected girls against marriage by abduction and forcible proleptic "consummation." Theodosius and his successors went further. For instance, the legal Code of Theodosius II (401–450), which incorporated and expanded upon the reforms of previous Christian emperors, included changes in divorce law from 421 that eradicated many of the disadvantages imposed upon women. A wife abandoned by her husband simply on grounds of domestic unhappiness was now entitled not only to reclaim her dowry but to retain her husband's betrothal gifts to her as well; she also acquired the right to remarry after a year of separation, while her husband was condemned to perpetual bachelorhood (if he violated this prohibition, both the dowry and the betrothal gifts of the new marriage became the property of his first wife). A husband, moreover, was prohibited from squandering or diminishing his wife's dowry, and at his death it reverted to her rather than passing into his estate. In fact, the code made inheritance law more equitable in general by assuring that the estates of deceased women passed uncontested to their children. A girl whose father prostituted her was entirely liberated from his authority, and (more remarkably) a slave girl similarly abused by her master ceased to be his property. And the emperor Justinian, encouraged in great measure by his wife Theodora, expanded the rights and protections of women in the empire to an altogether unprecedented degree.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Face of the Faceless

ALL FOUR OF THE canonical Gospels tell the tale of the apostle Peter's failure on the very eve of Christ's crucifixion: Peter's promise that he would never abandon Christ; Christ's prediction that Peter would in fact deny him that same night, not once but three times, before the cock's crow; Peter's cautious venture into the courtyard of the high priest, after Christ's arrest in the garden, and his confrontation with others present there who thought they recognized him as one of Christ's disciples; and the fear that prompted Peter to do at the last just as his master had prophesied. John's Gospel, in some ways the least tender of the four, leaves the story there; but the three synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—go on to relate that, on hearing the cock announce the break of day, Peter remembered Christ's words to him earlier in the evening and, seized by grief, went apart to weep bitterly.

To us today, this hardly seems an extraordinary detail of the narrative, however moving we may or may not find it; we would expect Peter to weep, and we certainly would expect any narrator to think the event worth recording. But, in some ways, taken in the context of the age in which the Gospels were written, there may well be no stranger or more remarkable moment in the whole of scripture. What is obvious to us—Peter's wounded soul, the profundity of his devotion to his teacher, the torment of his guilt, the crushing knowledge that Christ's imminent death forever

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foreclosed the possibility of seeking forgiveness for his betrayal—is obvious in very large part because we are the heirs of a culture that, in a sense, sprang from Peter's tears. To us, this rather small and ordinary narrative detail is unquestionably an ornament of the story, one that ennobles it, proves its gravity, widens its embrace of our common humanity. In this sense, all of us—even unbelievers—are "Christians" in our moral expectations of the world. To the literate classes of late antiquity, however, this tale of Peter weeping would more likely have seemed an aesthetic mistake; for Peter, as a rustic, could not possibly have been a worthy object of a well-bred man's sympathy, nor could his grief possibly have possessed the sort of tragic dignity necessary to make it worthy of anyone's notice. At most, the grief of a man of Peter's class might have had a place in comic literature: the querulous complaints of an indolent slave, the self-pitying expostulations of a witless peon, the anguished laments of a cuckolded taverner, and so on. Of course, in a tragic or epic setting a servant's tears might have been played as accompaniment to his master's sorrows, rather like the sympathetic whining of a devoted dog. But, when one compares this scene from the Gospels to the sort of emotional portraiture one finds in great Roman writers, comic or serious, one discovers—as the great literary critic Erich Auerbach noted half a century ago—that it is only in Peter that one sees "the image of man in the highest and deepest and most tragic sense."[1] Yet Peter remains, for all that, a Galilaean peasant. This is not merely a violation of good taste; it is an act of rebellion.

This is not, obviously, a claim regarding the explicit intent of any of the evangelists. But even Christianity's most implacable modern critics should be willing to acknowledge that, in these texts and others like them, we see something beginning to emerge from darkness into full visibility, arguably for the first time in our history: the human person as such, invested with an intrinsic and inviolable dignity, and possessed of an infinite value. It would not even be implausible to argue that our very ability to speak of "persons" as we do is a consequence of the revolution in moral sensibility that Christianity brought about. We, after all, employ this word with a splendidly indiscriminate generosity, applying it without hesitation to everyone, regardless of social station, race, or sex; but originally, at least in some of the most crucial contexts, it had a much more limited application. Specifically, in Roman legal usage, one's person was one's status before the law, which was certainly not something invariable

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from one individual to the next. The original and primary meaning of the Latin word *persona* was "mask," and as a legal term its use may well have harked back to the wax funerary effigies by which persons of social consequence were represented after their deaths, and which families of rank were allowed to display as icons of their ancestral pedigrees. Thus, by extension, to have a persona was to have a face before the law—which is to say, to be recognized as one possessing rights and privileges before a court, or as being able to give testimony upon the strength of one's own word, or simply as owning a respectable social identity, of which jurists must be conscious.

For those of the lowest stations, however—slaves, base-born non-citizens and criminals, the utterly destitute, colonized peoples—legal personality did not really exist, or existed in only the most tenuous of forms. Under the best of the pagan emperors, such as Augustus, certain legal protections were extended to slaves; but, of themselves, slaves had no real rights before the law, and no proper means of appeal against their masters. Moreover, their word was of no account. A slave was so entirely devoid of any "personal" dignity that, when called to testify before a duly appointed court, torture might be applied as a matter of course. For the slave was a man or woman *non habens personam:* literally, "not having a persona," or even "not having a face." Before the law, he or she was not a person in the fullest and most proper sense. Nor did he or she enjoy any greater visibility—any greater countenance, one might say—before society at large. In a sense, the only face proper to a slave, at least as far as the cultural imagination of the ancient world went, was the brutish and grotesquely leering "slave mask" worn by actors on the comic stage: an exquisitely exact manifestation of how anyone who was another's property was (naturally) seen.

We today have our bigotries, of course; we can hardly claim to have advanced so far as to know nothing of racism, for instance, or of its most violent expressions; it was not so long ago that blackface and the conventions of the minstrel show were as inoffensive to us as the slave mask was to ancient audiences; and certainly there is no such thing as a society without class hierarchies. All we can claim in our defense is that we have names for the social inequities we see or remember; we are, for the most part, aware—at least, those of us who are not incorrigibly stupid or cruel—that they violate the deepest moral principles we would be afraid

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not to profess; we are conscious also—the great majority of us, at any rate—that they are historical accidents, which do not reflect the inmost essence of reality or the immemorial decrees of the gods or of nature, and therefore can and should be corrected. But this is only because we live in the long twilight of a civilization formed by beliefs that, however obvious or trite they may seem to us, entered ancient society rather like a meteor from a clear sky. What for us is the quiet, persistent, perennial rebuke of conscience within us was, for ancient peoples, an outlandish decree issuing from a realm outside any world they could conceive. Conscience, after all, at least in regard to its particular contents, is to a great extent a cultural artifact, a historical contingency, and all of us today in the West, to some degree or another, have inherited a conscience formed by Christian moral ideals. For this reason, it is all but impossible for us to recover any real sense of the scandal that many pagans naturally felt at the bizarre prodigality with which the early Christians were willing to grant full humanity to persons of every class and condition, and of either sex.

A few modern men, it is true, have been able to induce a similar dismay in themselves, or have at least succeeded in mimicking it. Nietzsche, for instance, did his very best to share the noble pagan's revulsion at the sordid social sediments the early church continuously dredged up into its basilicas (though, middle-class pastor's boy that he was, he never became quite as effortlessly expert in patrician disdain as he imagined he had). But to hear that tone of alarm in its richest, purest, and most spontaneous registers one really has to repair to the pagans themselves: to Celsus, or Eunapius of Sardis, or the emperor Julian. What they saw, as they peered down upon the Christian movement from the high, narrow summit of their society, was not the understandable ebullition of long-suppressed human longings but the very order of the cosmos collapsing at its base, drawing everything down into the general ruin and obscene squalor of a common humanity. How else could they interpret the spectacle but as a kind of monstrous impiety and noisomely wicked degeneracy? In his treatise *Against the Galilaeans*, Julian complained that the Christians had from the earliest days swelled their ranks with the most vicious, disreputable, and contemptible of persons, while offering only baptism as a remedy for their vileness, as if mere water could cleanse the soul. Eunapius turned away with revulsion from the base gods that the earth was now breeding as a result of Christianity's subversion of good order: men and women of the

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the church became that most lamentable of things—a pillar of respectable society—it learned all too easily to tolerate many of the injustices it supposedly condemned. The enfranchised church has never been more than half Christian even at the best of times; often enough, it has been much less than that. Neither, however, should we underestimate how extraordinary the religious ethos of the earliest Christians was in regard to social order, or fail to give them credit for the attempts they did make to efface the distinctions in social dignity which had traditionally separated persons of different rank from one another, but which had been (they believed) abolished in Christ. When all is said and done, the pagan critics of the early church were right to see the new faith as an essentially subversive movement. In fact, they may have been somewhat more perspicacious in this regard than the Christians themselves. Christianity may never have been a revolution in the political sense: it was not a convulsive, violent, or intentionally provocative faction that had some "other vision" of political power to recommend; but neither, for that reason, was the change it brought about something merely local, transient, and finite. The Christian vision of reality was nothing less than—to use the words of Nietzsche—a "transvaluation of all values," a complete revision of the moral and conceptual categories by which human beings were to understand themselves and one another and their places within the world. It was—again to use Nietzsche's words, but without his sneer—a "slave revolt in morality." But it was also, as far as the Christians were concerned, a slave revolt "from above," if such a thing could be imagined; for it had been accomplished by a savior who had, as Paul said in his Epistle to the Philippians, willingly exchanged the "form of God" for the "form of a slave," and had thereby overthrown the powers that reigned on high.

Perhaps even more striking than the episode of Peter's tears—at least, in regard to its cultural setting—is the story of Christ before Pilate, especially as related in the Gospel of John. Again, an immense historical distance intervenes between us and the age in which the text was produced; and, again, the moral meaning of the scene is one to which most of us today are prepared, at least emotionally, to assent; so we cannot quite *feel* its strangeness, or the novelty of its metaphysical implications. To its earliest readers, however, what could such a scene have meant? On one side of the tableau stands a man of noble birth, invested with the full authority

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of the Roman Empire, entrusted with the responsibility of imposing the *pax Romana*, in a barbarous country, upon an uncouth and intractable indigenous population too much given to religious fanaticism. On the other side stands a poor and possibly demented colonial of obscure origins and indiscernible ambitions who, when asked if he is King of the Jews, replies only with vague and enigmatic invocations of a kingdom not of this world and of some mysterious truth to which he is called to bear witness. In the great cosmic hierarchy of rational powers—descending from the Highest God down to the lowliest of slaves—Pilate's is a particularly exalted place, a little nearer to heaven than to earth, and imbued with something of the splendor of the gods. Christ, by contrast, has no natural claim whatsoever upon Pilate's clemency, nor any chartered rights upon which he might call; simply said, he has no person before the law. One figure in this picture, then, enjoys perfect sway over life and death, while the other no longer belongs even to himself. And the picture's asymmetry becomes even starker (and perhaps even more absurd) when Jesus is brought before Pilate for the second time, having been scourged, wrapped in a soldier's cloak, and crowned with thorns. To the ears of any ancient person, Pilate's question to his prisoner now—"Where do you come from?"—would almost certainly have sounded like a perfectly pertinent, if obviously sardonic, inquiry into Christ's pedigrees, and a pointed reminder that, in comparison to Pilate, Christ is no one at all. And Pilate's still more explicit admonition a moment later—"I have power to crucify you"—would have had something of the ring of a rhetorical coup de grâce. Christ's claim, on the other hand, that Pilate possesses no powers not given him from above would have sounded like only the comical impudence of a lunatic.

Could any ancient witness to this scene, recognizing how fate had apportioned to its principals their respective places in the order of things, have doubted on which side the full "truth" of things was to be found? For what measure of reality is there, in a world sustained by immutable hierarchies of social privilege, apart from the relative calculus of power: Who has the authority to judge others? Who possesses the right to kill? This much, in fact, Pilate had already communicated at his first interrogation of Christ, and with the tersest eloquence, when he asked, "What is truth?"—expecting and needing no reply. Nietzsche, who—better than almost any other modern critic or champion of Christianity—understood how vast a confrontation between worlds is concentrated in this scene,

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spoke for practically the whole of antique culture when he pronounced this question of Pilate's the only commendable sentence to be found anywhere in Christian scripture, a shining instance of noble irony that had, through the curious inattention of the evangelist, become anomalously fixed in the frozen morass of the New Testament, like a glittering dragonfly preserved in a particularly dark amber.

I have to assume, however, that most of us today simply *cannot* see Christ and Pilate in this way. We come too late in time to think like ancient men and women, and few of us, I hope, would be so childish as to want to. Try though we might, we shall never really be able to see Christ's broken, humiliated, and doomed humanity as something self-evidently contemptible and ridiculous; we are instead, in a very real sense, *destined* to see it as encompassing the very mystery of our own humanity: a sublime fragility, at once tragic and magnificent, pitiable and wonderful. Obviously, of course, many of us are quite capable of looking upon the sufferings of others with indifference or even contempt. But what I mean to say is that even the worst of us, raised in the shadow of Christendom, lacks the ability to ignore those sufferings without prior violence to his or her own conscience. We have lost the capacity for innocent callousness. Living as we do in the long aftermath of a revolution so profound that its effects persist in the deepest reaches of our natures, we cannot *simply* and guilelessly avert our eyes from the abasement of the victim in order to admire the grandeur of his persecutor; and for just this reason we lack any immediate consciousness of the radical inversion of perspective that has occurred in these pages. Seen from within the closed totality of a certain pre-Christian vision of reality, however, Pilate's verdict is essentially a just one: not because the penalty it imposes is somehow proportionate to the "crime" (what would that mean anyway?), but because it affirms the natural and divine order of reality, by consigning a worthless man to an appropriately undignified death, and by restoring order through the destruction of the agent of disorder. For, in the end, the gods love order above all else. The Gospel of John, however, approaches the confrontation between Christ and Pilate from a vantage unprecedented in human culture: the faith of Easter. And the result of this new angle of approach, soberly considered, is somewhat outrageous. God, it seems, far from approving the verdict of his alleged earthly representatives—Gentiles or Jews, priests or procurators, emperors, generals, or judges—entirely reverses their judgment, and in

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fact vindicates and restores to life the very man they have "justly" condemned in the interest of public tranquility. This is an astonishing realignment of every perspective, an epochal reversal of all values, a rebellion against reality. Once again, no one ever evinced a keener sense of the magnitude of this subversion than did Nietzsche, or deplored it more bitterly; but Nietzsche saw no motive behind this Christian audacity deeper than simple resentment, and here his insight certainly failed him. Resentment is, of its nature, crude and ponderous; by itself, it can destroy, but it cannot create; and whatever else this inverted or reversed perspective was, it was clearly a powerful act of creativity, a grand reimagining of the possibilities of human existence. It would not have been possible had it not been sustained by a genuine and generous happiness.

The new world we see being brought into being in the Gospels is one in which the whole grand cosmic architecture of prerogative, power, and eminence has been shaken and even superseded by a new, positively "anarchic" order: an order, that is, in which we see the glory of God revealed in a crucified slave, and in which (consequently) we are enjoined to see the forsaken of the earth as the very children of heaven. In this shockingly, ludicrously disordered order (so to speak), even the mockery visited on Christ—the burlesque crown and robe—acquires a kind of ironic opulence: in the light cast backward upon the scene by the empty tomb, it becomes all at once clear that it is not Christ's "ambitions" that are laughable, but those emblems of earthly authority whose travesties have been draped over his shoulders and pressed into his scalp. We can now see with perfect poignancy the vanity of empires and kingdoms, and the absurdity of men who wrap themselves in rags and adorn themselves with glittering gauds and promote themselves with preposterous titles and thereby claim license to rule over others. And yet the figure of Christ seems only to grow in dignity. It is tempting to describe this vision of reality as—for want of a better alternative—a total humanism: a vision, that is, of humanity in its widest and deepest scope, one that finds the full nobility and mystery and beauty of the human countenance—the human person—in each unique instance of the common nature. Seen thus, Christ's supposed descent from the "form of God" into the "form of a slave" is not so much a paradox as a perfect confirmation of the indwelling of the divine image in each soul. And, once the world has been seen in this way, it can never again be what it formerly was.

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This, of course, again raises rather obvious questions regarding the general failure of the church after Constantine to translate this "total humanism" into what, in long retrospect, looks to us like plain social justice. Not that such questions should be allowed to degenerate into facile sanctimony. It would be an almost perfect anachronism, for instance, to ask why post-Constantinian society was satisfied with mere legal ameliorations of the conditions of slaves (and those of a frequently inconsistent nature) rather than with the complete abolition of slavery as an institution. Christians of the fourth through the sixth centuries, many of whom would have been only "lightly baptized" in any event, would have found it scarcely any easier to imagine that they could replace the entire economic and social system of their world with another, better system than to imagine that they could persuade the mountains to exchange places with the clouds. But, still, one has to admit that the Great Church of the imperial era was not exactly heroic in its vision of the social implications of its creed. As a rule, only certain extraordinary individuals—certain saints—were willing to press the principles of the faith to their most unsettling conclusions.

Nevertheless, what should really astonish us by its improbability is not that so few Christians behaved in a way perfectly consistent with their beliefs but that such beliefs had ever come into existence in the first place. Every true historical revolution is a conceptual revolution first, and the magnitude of any large revision of the conditions or premises of human life (to say nothing of the time required for it to bear historical fruit) is determined by the magnitude of that prior "spiritual" achievement. Considered thus, the rise of Christianity was surely an upheaval of unprecedented and still unequaled immensity. Naturally, when we look back to the early centuries of the enfranchised church for signs of revolutionary vitality, we do so from the privileged position of late modern men and women, and so tend to think we see only fugitive gleams amid a general and otherwise unrelieved darkness. If we are somewhat more attentive, we become aware of a number of gradual—but substantial—incremental changes that took place within certain of the institutions and traditions of antiquity. But still, if this is all we see, we have missed what is most essential. Considering the hierarchy of values that began to find expression in those centuries, what we should be able to discern on looking back is a massive tectonic shift in the spiritual culture common to

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the minds and wills of ancient men and women. There is more than a formal difference, after all, between the soul that is merely unaware of its sins and the soul that is obstinately unrepentant; and the same is true of society as a whole. Once a person or a people comes to recognize an evil for what it is, even if that evil is then allowed to continue for a time, in whole or in part, the most radical change has already come to pass. Thereafter, everything—penitence, regeneration, forgiveness, rebellion, reconciliation—becomes possible. For what it is to be human has been, in some real way, irrevocably altered.

Take for example, once again, what to us constitutes the most obvious case of Christian dereliction in the early centuries of the Constantinian church: the persistence of slavery. Even if it is, as I have said, anachronistic to expect ancient persons to have viewed the institution as an accidental or dispensable feature of their society, and even if it is equally anachronistic to think of slavery in ancient Roman culture as a perfect corollary of the slave systems that flourished in the Americas in the early modern period, it is still entirely reasonable to wonder at the ability of so many ancient Christians to believe simultaneously that all men and women should be their brothers and sisters in Christ and also that certain men and women should be their legal property. The greater marvel, however, in purely historical terms, is that there were even a few who recognized the contradiction. And there were.

Admittedly, the attitudes of many of the fathers of the church toward slavery ranged from (at best) resigned acceptance to (at worst) a kind of prudential approval. All of them regarded slavery as a mark of sin, of course, and all could take some comfort in the knowledge that, at the restoration of creation in the Kingdom of God, it would vanish altogether. They even understood that this expectation necessarily involved certain moral implications for the present. But, for most of them, the best that could be hoped for within a fallen world (apart from certain legal reforms) was a spirit of charity, gentleness, and familial regard on the part of masters and a spirit of longsuffering on the part of servants. Basil of Caesarea found it necessary to defend the subjection of some men to others, on the grounds that not all are capable of governing themselves wisely and virtuously. John Chrysostom dreamed of a perfect (probably eschatological) society in which none would rule over another, celebrated the extension of legal rights and protections to slaves, and fulminated against Christian

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masters who would dare to humiliate or beat their slaves. Augustine, with his darker, colder, more brutal vision of the fallen world, disliked slavery but did not think it wise always to spare the rod, at least not when the welfare of the soul should take precedence over the welfare of the flesh. Each of them knew that slavery was essentially a damnable thing—which in itself was a considerable advance in moral intelligence over the ethos of pagan antiquity—but damnation, after all, is reserved for the end of time; none of them found it possible to convert that eschatological certainty into a program for the present. But this is hardly surprising. All three were creatures of their time, and we should not expect them to have seen very far beyond the boundaries of the world they knew. Given the inherently restive quality of the human moral imagination, it is only natural that certain of the moral values of the pagan past should have lingered on so long into the Christian era, just as any number of Christian moral values continue today to enjoy a tacit and largely unexamined authority in minds and cultures that no longer believe the Christian story.

And yet—confusingly enough for any conventional calculation of historical probability—there is Gregory of Nyssa, Basil's younger and more brilliant brother, who sounded a very different note, one that almost seems to have issued from some altogether different frame of reality. At least, one searches in vain through the literary remains of antiquity—pagan, Jewish, or Christian—for any other document remotely comparable in tone or content to Gregory's fourth sermon on the book of Ecclesiastes, which he preached during Lent in 379, and which comprises a long passage unequivocally and indignantly condemning slavery *as an institution*. That is to say, in this sermon Gregory does not simply treat slavery as an extravagance in which Christians ought not to indulge beyond the dictates of necessity, nor does he confine himself to denouncing the injustices and cruelties of which slaveholders are frequently guilty. These things one would naturally expect, since moral admonitions and exhortations to repentance are part of the standard Lenten repertoire of any competent homilist. Moreover, ever since 321, when Constantine had granted the churches the power of legally certifying manumissions (the power of *manumissio in ecclesia*), propertied Christians had often taken Easter as an occasion for emancipating slaves, and Gregory was no doubt hoping to encourage his parishioners to follow the custom. But if all he had wanted to do was recommend manumission as a spiritual hygiene or as a gesture

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of benevolence, he could have done so quite (and perhaps more) effectively by using a considerably more temperate tone than one actually finds in his sermon. For there he directs his anger not at the abuse of slavery but at its use; he reproaches his parishioners not for mistreating their slaves but for daring to imagine they have the right to own other human beings in the first place.

One cannot overemphasize this distinction. On occasion, scholars who have attempted to make this sermon conform to their expectations of fourth century rhetoric have tried to read it as belonging to some standard type of penitential oration, perhaps rather more hyperbolic in some of its language but ultimately intended to do no more than impress the consciences of its hearers with the need for humility. The problem with such an approach, of course, is that a "type" of which no other example exists is hardly a type in any meaningful sense. More to the point, Gregory's language in the sermon is simply too unambiguous to be read as anything other than what it is. He leaves no room for Christian slaveholders to console themselves with the thought that they, at any rate, are merciful masters, generous enough to liberate the occasional worthy servant but wise enough to know when they must continue to exercise stewardship over less responsible souls. He certainly could have done just this; he begins his diatribe (which is not too strong a word) with a brief exegetical excursus on a single, rather unexceptional verse, Ecclesiastes 2:7 ("I got me male and female slaves, and had my home-born slaves as well"): a text that would seem to invite only a few bracing imprecations against luxuriance and sloth, and nothing more. As he warms to his theme, however, Gregory goes well beyond this. For anyone at all, he says, to presume mastery over another person is the grossest imaginable arrogance, a challenge to and a robbery of God, to whom alone all persons belong. Moreover, he continues, for one person to deprive another of the freedom granted to all human beings by God is to violate and indeed to overturn the law of God, which explicitly gives us no such power over one another. At what price, Gregory goes on to ask his congregation, could one ever be said to have purchased the image of God—which is what each person is—as God alone possesses resources equal to such a treasure? In fact, says Gregory, directly linking his argument to the approaching Easter feast, since God's greatest gift to us is the perfect liberty vouchsafed us by Christ's saving action in time, and since God's gifts are entirely ir-

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revocable, it lies not even in *God's* power to enslave men and women. Anyway, he reasons, it is known that, when a slave is bought, so are all of his or her worldly possessions; but God has given dominion over all of creation to each and every person, and there simply is no sum sufficient for the purchase of so vast an estate. So, he tells his congregation, you may imagine that the exchange of coin and receipt of deed really endows you with superiority over another, but you are deceived: all of us are equal, prey to the same frailties, capable of the same joys, beneficiaries of the same redemption, and subject to the same judgment. We are therefore equal in every respect, but—says Gregory—"you have divided our nature between slavery and mastery, and have made it at once slave to itself and master over itself."

Where does this language come from? We can try to identify certain of the immediate influences on Gregory's thought. His sister Macrina, for example, was a theologian and contemplative of considerable accomplishment who had persuaded her (and Gregory's and Basil's) mother to live a common life of service, prayer, and devotion with her servants; and Gregory revered Macrina. But even his sister's example cannot account for the sheer uncompromising vehemence of Gregory's sermon, or for the logic that informs it—which, taken at face value, seems to press inexorably toward abolition. And there are other mysteries in Gregory's language as well. What, for instance, does it mean to complain that slaveholders have divided our common nature as human beings by their deeds? To answer this question fully would require a long investigation of Gregory's metaphysics (and he was, as it happens, a philosopher of considerable originality), but that is not necessary here. Suffice it to say that Gregory obviously cannot understand human nature as, for instance, Aristotle did: as merely an invariable, abstract set of properties, of which any given man or woman constitutes either a more excellent or a more degenerate expression. For Aristotle, it is precisely knowledge of what human nature is that allows us to judge that some human beings are deficient specimens of the kind and therefore suited only to serve as the "living tools" of other men (which is how he defines slaves in both the *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemian Ethics*). Human nature, understood in this sense, is simply the ideal index of the species, one which allows us to arrange our understanding of human existence into exact and obvious divisions of authority: the superiority of reason over appetite, of course, but also of

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city over nature, man over woman, Greek over barbarian, and master over slave. For Gregory, by contrast, the entire idea of human nature has been thoroughly suffused with the light of Easter, "contaminated" by the Christian inversion of social order; our nature is, for him, first and foremost our community in the humanity of Christ, who by descending into the most abject of conditions, even dying the death of a criminal, only to be raised up as Lord of history, in the very glory of God, has become forever the face of the faceless, the persona by which each of us has been raised to the dignity of a "co-heir of the Kingdom."

This, perhaps, is all the explanation we need—or can hope to find—for Gregory's sermon. Modern persons of a secularist bent, who believe that the roots of their solicitude for human equality reach down no deeper in the soil of history than the so-called Age of Enlightenment, often tend to imagine that their values are nothing more than the rational impulses of any sane conscience unencumbered by prejudice. But this is nonsense. There is no such thing as "enlightened" morality, if by that one means an ethics written on the fabric of our nature, which anyone can discover simply by the light of disinterested reason. There are, rather, moral traditions, shaped by events, ideas, inspirations, and experiences; and no morality is devoid of the contingencies of particular cultural histories. Whatever it is we think we mean by human "equality," we are able to presume the moral weight of such a notion only because far deeper down in the historical strata of our shared Western consciousness we retain the memory of an unanticipated moment of spiritual awakening, a delighted and astonished intellectual response to a single historical event: the proclamation of Easter. It was because of his faith in the risen Christ that Gregory could declare in his commentary on the Beatitudes, without any irony or reserve, that if Christians truly practiced the mercy commanded of them by their Lord humanity would no longer admit of divisions within itself between slavery and mastery, poverty and wealth, shame and honor, infirmity and strength, for all things would be held in common and all persons would be equal one with another. In the sermon he preached for Easter 379, Gregory resumes many of the themes of his Lenten addresses on Ecclesiastes, including that of the moral odium of slavery; Easter, he makes it clear, is a time to celebrate every form of emancipation, and thus he seamlessly unites the theme of our liberation from the household of death to his renewed call for the manumission of slaves. There is nothing at all forced

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Death and Birth of Worlds

VIOLENT, SUDDEN, AND calamitous revolutions are the ones that accomplish the least. While they may succeed at radically reordering societies, they usually cannot transform cultures. They may excel at destroying the past, but they are generally impotent to create a future. The revolutions that genuinely alter human reality at the deepest levels—the only real revolutions, that is to say—are those that first convert minds and wills, that reshape the imagination and reorient desire, that overthrow tyrannies within the soul. Christianity, in its first three centuries, was a revolution of the latter sort: gradual, subtle, exceedingly small and somewhat inchoate at first, slowly introducing its vision of divine, cosmic, and human reality into the culture around it, often by deeds rather than words, and simply enduring from one century to the next. It was probably a largely urban phenomenon, appealing to the moderately affluent and educated as well as to the poor, though as time passed it won patrons and sympathizers among the nobility. As I have noted already, it was somewhat conspicuous by its general indiscriminacy regarding the social stations of its converts and by its special attraction for women, and it may have entered many households through wives and daughters. It endured obloquy and false rumor, but over time won admiration from many for its charitable zeal, even toward unbelievers. Persecutions were sporadic, though sometimes fierce, but their ultimate effect was to refine and strengthen the faith. As

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had been and was being worked out. The absolute partition between temporal and eternal truth had been not only breached but annihilated.

All of this is probably quite obvious; similar observations have been made often enough, in one form or another, frequently as a prelude to some more ambitious assertions regarding the unique energy or power of innovation infused into Western culture by Christian principles. This latter topic bores me, I have to confess. It is too often discussed in tones of unwarranted confidence, as though it were the simplest of matters to discern precisely which immaterial ideas shape which material events, and how, or to discriminate between necessary and fortuitous historical developments. In a general sense, any philosophically sophisticated monotheism has the advantage over any unreflective polytheism in fostering a culture of scientific investigation. But, historically speaking, pagan and Christian culture alike nurtured both forms of religion, the former being characteristic of the educated classes and the latter of the uneducated, and in either pagan or Christian culture—not surprisingly—science was a pursuit of the very educated, and was susceptible of periods both of creativity and of stagnation. In an equally general sense, a people who believes in the purposiveness of history and the possibility of new and redemptive historical developments is somewhat more likely to conceive and realize great social, political, and economic projects than is a people without such beliefs. But new forms of political association were generated in pre-Christian cultures as well; Rome, for instance, passed quite nimbly from monarchy to republic to empire without the mighty impetus of Christian salvation history at its back. And unless Christian apologists are eager to accept credit for much that is not creditable, and to argue that their faith made straight the way for all the large political movements of Western history, including the very horrid ones, they should venture claims regarding the inevitable political and economic consequences of Christian beliefs only tentatively and, as it were, sotto voce.

What interests me—and what I take to be genuinely demonstrable and important—is the particular ensemble of moral and imaginative values engendered in numberless consciences by Christian beliefs. That such values had political and social consequences I certainly do not deny; I feel fairly safe in saying, for instance, that abolitionism—as a purely moral cause—could not easily have arisen in any non-Christian culture of which I am aware. That is quite different, however, from claiming that

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Christianity ineluctably or uniquely must give rise to, say, democracy or capitalism or empirical science. It is to say, rather, that the Christian account of reality introduced into our world an understanding of the divine, the cosmic, and the human that had no exact or even proximate equivalent elsewhere and that made possible a moral vision of the human person that has haunted us ever since, century upon century.

It may be that the truly distinctive nature of Christianity's understanding of reality first began to assume concrete conceptual form only in the course of the great doctrinal disputes of the fourth and fifth (and, by extension, sixth and seventh) centuries, when theologians were forced by the exigencies of debate to formulate their beliefs as lucidly and as thoroughly as possible. The dogmatic controversies of those years constitute at once one of the peculiar embarrassments and one of the peculiar glories of Christian tradition. The embarrassment follows not (as critics such as Gibbon would have it) from the supposedly too abstract or needlessly precise nature of the arguments regarding the Trinity or the person of Christ but from the rancor and occasional violence that surrounded them. And the glory lies in the remarkable conceptual visions and revisions those debates involved, and the way in which they gave form to a uniquely Christian philosophy.

One cannot really understand the Trinitarian debates of the fourth century, in particular, without some knowledge of the metaphysical picture of reality that many of the major intellectual traditions of the time—pagan, Jewish, and Christian—to some degree shared. Especially in the great intellectual center of the Eastern empire, Alexandria, a fairly uniform understanding (at least, in terms of general morphology) of the relation between God and lower reality had held sway for centuries. According to this vision of things, all of reality was arranged in a hierarchy of beings, the "shape" of which might be described as a pyramid, with purely material nature at its base, and God Most High or the eternal One at its summit. Between the lowest and the highest places, moreover, were a plurality of intermediate agencies, powers, and substances, but for which there would have been no relation between high and low, and thus no universe at all, spiritual or material. God was understood as that supreme reality from which all lesser realities came, but also as in a sense contained within the hierarchy, as the most exalted of its entities. Such was his magnificence

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foremost the question of salvation that must determine how the identity of Christ is to be conceived. And they understood salvation, it must be appreciated, not in the rather impoverished way of many modern Christians, as a kind of extrinsic legal transaction between the divine and human by which a debt is canceled and the redeemed soul issued a certificate of entry into the afterlife; rather they saw salvation as nothing less than a real and living union between God and his creatures. To be saved was to be joined to God himself in Christ, to be in fact "divinized"—which is to say, in the words of 2 Peter 1:4, to become "partakers of the divine nature." In a lapidary phrase favored, in one form or another, by a number of the church fathers, "God became man that man might become god." In Christ, the Nicene party believed, the human and divine had been joined together in a perfect and indissoluble unity, by participation in which human beings might be admitted to a share in his divinity.

This being so, salvation is possible only if, in Christ, God himself had descended into our midst. For if we have been created for nothing less than real and intimate communion with the eternal God—if ours is indeed a destiny so great—then the end for which we are intended is one to which no mere creature, however exalted, could ever raise us. Only God can join us to God. And so, if it is Christ who joins us to the Father, then Christ must himself be no less than God, and must be equal to the Father in divinity. By this same logic, of course, as the doctrinal debates of the latter half of the century would make clear, the Spirit too must be God of God, coequal with the Father and the Son. For it is only by the action of the Spirit—in the sacraments, in the church, in our own lives of inward sanctification—that we are joined to the Son: and only God can join us to God. This is, if nothing else, a strange, daring, and luminous idea, one that did not easily recommend itself to the minds of ancient persons: not only that God is in our midst but also that we—saved by being incorporated into the Trinitarian life of Father, Son, and Spirit—are in the midst of God.

Quite apart from their spiritual significance, moreover, the doctrinal determinations of the fourth century are notable for a number of rather remarkable metaphysical implications. What emerged from these debates was the grammar of an entirely new understanding not only of God but of the nature of created reality. Whereas, on the old and now obsolete Alexandrian model, God was understood principally as an impenetrable

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mystery, at an impossible remove from created beings, for whom the Logos functioned as a kind of outward emblem and ambassador, and of which the Spirit was an even more remote and subordinate emissary; now God was understood as a living fullness of internal and dynamic relation, an infinite movement of knowledge and love, in whom the Logos is the Father's own infinite self-manifestation to himself, and the Spirit the infinitely accomplished joy of that life of perfect love. And thus, in the revelation of God in Christ, through the Spirit, the Father himself had made himself known to his creatures. More to the point here, with the adoption of this language of God as Trinity, an entire metaphysical tradition had been implicitly abandoned. No longer could God in the "proper" sense be conceived of as an inaccessible Supreme Being dwelling at the top of the scale of essences, who acts upon creation only from afar, by a series of ever more remote deputations, and who is himself contained within the economy of the high and the low. If all of God's actions in the Son and Spirit are nothing less than immediate actions of God himself, in the fullness of his divine identity, then creation and redemption alike are immediate works of God.

At this point, a new, more developed understanding of both divine transcendence and created goodness has taken shape. On the one hand, the somewhat absurd and mythological picture of transcendence as sublime absence, as the sheer supremacy of some discrete superbeing up "there" at the summit of reality, had been replaced by a more cogent understanding of transcendence as God's perfect freedom from limitation, his ability to be at once infinitely beyond and infinitely within finite reality; for a God who is truly transcendent could never be confined merely to the top of the hierarchy of beings. And, on the other hand, a certain "pathos of distance" had been banished from the philosophical understanding of creation, for it was no longer the case—as once it had been—that finite reality had to be understood as, of its nature, something defective and tragically severed from the wellspring of being and truth: this world is not merely the realm of unlikeness, forever alien to God, from which the soul must flee to be saved; and God does not lie forever beyond the reach of finite natures. The world is in itself good and beautiful and true; it is in fact the very theater of divine action. And all of this, moreover—and this is not a contradiction—followed precisely from the affirmation of the real difference between divine and created being. On the older model, the

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divine glory, recognized as a fellow creature; it might justly be cherished, cultivated, investigated, enjoyed, but not feared, not rejected as evil or deficient, and certainly not worshipped. In this and other ways the Christian revolution gave Western culture the world simply *as* world, demystified and so (only seemingly paradoxically) full of innumerable wonders to be explored. What is perhaps far more important is that it also gave that culture a coherent concept of the human as such, endowed with infinite dignity in all its individual "moments," full of powers and mysteries to be fathomed and esteemed. It provided an unimaginably exalted picture of the human person—made in the divine image and destined to partake of the divine nature—without thereby diminishing or denigrating the concrete reality of human nature, spiritual, intellectual, or carnal. It even produced the idea (which no society has ever more than partially embodied) of a political order wholly subordinate to divine charity, to verities higher than any state, and to a justice transcending every government or earthly power. In short, the rise of Christianity produced consequences so immense that it can almost be said to have begun the world anew: to have "invented" the human, to have bequeathed us our most basic concept of nature, to have determined our vision of the cosmos and our place in it, and to have shaped all of us (to one degree or another) in the deepest reaches of consciousness.

All of the glories and failures of the civilizations that were born of this revolution, however, everything for which Christendom as a historical, material reality might be praised or blamed, fades in significance before the still more singular moral triumph of Christian tradition. The ultimate power and meaning of the Christian movement within the ancient world cannot be measured simply by the richness of later Christian culture's art or architecture, the relative humanity or inhumanity of its societies and laws, the creativity of its economic or scientific institutions, or the perdurability of its religious institutions through the ages. "Christendom" was only the outward, sometimes majestic, but always defective form of the interaction between the gospel and the intractable stuff of human habit. The more vital and essential victory of Christianity lay in the strange, impractical, altogether unworldly tenderness of the moral intuitions it succeeded in sowing in human consciences. If we find ourselves occasionally shocked by how casually ancient men and women destroyed or ignored lives we would think ineffably precious, we would do well to reflect that

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theirs was—in purely pragmatic terms—a more "natural" disposition toward reality. It required an extraordinary moment of awakening in a few privileged souls, and then centuries of the relentless and total immersion of culture in the Christian story, to make even the best of us conscious of (or at least able to believe in) the moral claim of all other persons upon us, the splendor and irreducible dignity of the divine humanity within them, that depth within each of them that potentially touches upon the eternal. In the light of Christianity's absolute law of charity, we came to see what formerly we could not: the autistic or Down syndrome or otherwise disabled child, for instance, for whom the world can remain a perpetual perplexity, which can too often cause pain but perhaps only vaguely and fleetingly charm or delight; the derelict or wretched or broken man or woman who has wasted his or her life away; the homeless, the utterly impoverished, the diseased, the mentally ill, the physically disabled; exiles, refugees, fugitives; even criminals and reprobates. To reject, turn away from, or kill any or all of them would be, in a very real sense, the most purely practical of impulses. To be able, however, to see in them not only something of worth but indeed something potentially godlike, to be cherished and adored, is the rarest and most ennoblingly unrealistic capacity ever bred within human souls. To look on the child whom our ancient ancestors would have seen as somehow unwholesome or as a worthless burden, and would have abandoned to fate, and to see in him or her instead a person worthy of all affection—resplendent with divine glory, ominous with an absolute demand upon our consciences, evoking our love and our reverence—is to be set free from mere elemental existence, and from those natural limitations that pre-Christian persons took to be the very definition of reality. And only someone profoundly ignorant of history and of native human inclinations could doubt that it is only as a consequence of the revolutionary force of Christianity within our history, within the very heart of our shared nature, that any of us can experience this freedom. We deceive ourselves also, however, if we doubt how very fragile this vision of things truly is: how elusive this truth that only charity can know, how easily forgotten this mystery that only charity can penetrate.

All of which, as I take leave of this phase of my argument, raises certain questions for me. A civilization, it seems obvious, is only as great or as

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wonderful as the spiritual ideals that animate it; and Christian ideals have shown themselves to be almost boundless in cultural fertility and dynamism. And yet, as the history of modernity shows, the creativity of these ideals can, in certain times and places, be exhausted, or at least subdued, if social and material circumstances cease to be propitious for them. I cannot help but wonder, then, what remains behind when Christianity's power over culture recedes? How long can our gentler ethical prejudices—many of which seem to me to be melting away with fair rapidity—persist once the faith that gave them their rationale and meaning has withered away? Love endures all things perhaps, as the apostle says, and is eternal; but, as a cultural reality, even love requires a reason for its preeminence among the virtues, and the mere habit of solicitude for others will not necessarily long survive when that reason is no longer found. If, as I have argued in these pages, the "human" as we now understand it is the positive invention of Christianity, might it not be the case that a culture that has become truly post-Christian will also, ultimately, become posthuman?

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