

PART THREE

CONSTANTINE, AUGUSTINE,
AND THE JEWS



The Heart of This Story Is a Place

DRAW A MAP OF Europe in your mind. Picture the boot of Italy, the rolled cuff of the Alps, and that country's western coastline curving around to the south of France. Cutting northward from Marseilles is the Rhone River, which in Roman times was a highway through the wilds of Gaul. Above Lyons, the river peters out, but not many miles away, another, the Saone, begins, leading on to the Meuse, which leads to yet another, the Moselle. Crossing into Germany as the Mosel, it intersects the mighty Rhine at Koblenz, a Roman city named for the *confluentes* of the two great rivers. More efficient as transport than the touted Roman roads, the network of rivers was the key to the expansion of the empire north — especially the Rhine, flowing from the Alps to the North Sea. Bisecting the continent, the river made it possible for the caesars to conquer as far north as England, even before the birth of Christ.

But the Rhine also marked the permanent eastern limit of the Roman sway. Caesar Augustus, who ruled at the time Jesus was born, proposed the expansion of the empire into the northern wilderness. He decreed that the River Elbe, jutting down from the Scandinavian peninsula, was to be the far boundary of Rome, but it wasn't to be. In the year 9 C.E., the Roman legions, pushing into the heart of what we think of as eastern Germany, were routed at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, a clash that left twenty thousand legionnaires dead. The defeat kept the Roman line at the Rhine. That frontier hardened into Europe's cultural fault line, with Latin-derived Romance languages to its west and south, Germanic-Slavic languages east and north. If the Battle of Teutoburg Forest had gone the other way, citizens of present-day Berlin might be speaking French.

The Rhine was the defining boundary of the Reformation too, the front line of every major war fought in Europe, and the *casus belli* of the worst of them. Such history was foretold, perhaps, by the fact that the first Ro-

man settlements on that river, among them Mainz (at the confluence of the Main), Koblenz, and Cologne, a city whose earlier name, *Colonus*, meant “colony,” began as fortified military outposts. A civilian supply settlement to support those and other outposts was established safely back from the Rhine frontier, about seventy miles up the Moselle from Koblenz. Taking its name, *Augusta Treverorum*, from a local Celtic tribe, the *Treveri* — the name would evolve into today’s Trier — this settlement became the capital of the empire’s western territories (Gaul, Spain, Germania, and Britain). As such, it was the first real city north of the Alps. Early in the Common Era, mail routinely went from Trier to Rome in little more than a week, an efficiency that would be lost, after the empire’s decline, for more than a thousand years.

Today Trier has a population of under a hundred thousand, and is known, if for anything, for the modest house on *Bruckenstrasse* in which Karl Marx was born. Marx graduated from the local gymnasium, or high school — as did, most of a century later, a lad named Klaus Barbie, who grew up to be a notorious SS officer. In the thread that binds together Catholics and Jews, Marx and that Nazi form separate knots. But the point here is what goes unnoticed in Trier. Karl Marx’s house is now a museum devoted to what he did and what he meant. A few blocks away stand the stunning but less noted remains of the palace of the Roman emperor Constantine (288?–337). It is a hauntingly mammoth hall, stark bricks setting off the rounded arches of Roman windows, with a coffered oak ceiling. The structure is huge, like a hangar for the *Hindenburg*, but today it serves as a sparsely attended Lutheran church, the Church of our Savior. In guidebooks it is referred to as the *Konstantin-basilika*. In Constantine’s time it was known as *Aula Palatina*. Like the city that grows out from it, the *Basilika* is far removed from today’s beaten tourist trail; Michelin gives it no star. And so it was in the late 1950s, when as a teenage boy I came by chance to Trier with my mother. I did not see Constantine’s palace then, although a postwar restoration was completed in 1956. For us Americans, the story of ancient Rome belonged in Italy. I would not know of Trier even now but for that accidental pilgrimage with my mother. I will explain below what brought us to Trier, and how that city returns us repeatedly to this book’s great question of Catholics and Jews, providing an unlikely but certain geographical touchstone throughout the centuries. But for the moment, it is enough to say that what brought my mother and me to Trier was not Karl Marx.

I am sixteen years old, kneeling next to Mom on the cold marble step of a columned railing in a corner of the largest church in the world, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome — a religious version of Constantine's palace. My family is soon to have the private audience with Pope John XXIII referred to earlier. The privilege, as I said, was due my father as a general and a Catholic. My mother has status too. She will be congratulated by His Holiness, as she has been by Cardinal Spellman, for her work as president of the Military Council of Catholic Women. Her position involved, for one thing, arranging a series of members' pilgrimages to holy places. Mom had taken a few preliminary trips herself, and I had accompanied her to several Catholic shrines, mostly in Germany — journeys I would retrace for this book.

But now, at sixteen, beside her, I am staring at the wondrous face of another mother, for we are kneeling at Michelangelo's *Pietà*. I glance at Mom. Her eyes are liquid, and I guess that they are fixed on the nail hole in Jesus' otherwise perfect right foot. His calf muscles and knees and thighs are toned and slim like an athlete's. The skin is taut across his ribs. His lifeless right hand rests just off the fold of Mary's dress. His left hand falls toward her lap. Each hand has its hole.

The fingers of Mary's right hand press out from below his armpit. Who has ever touched you there? His head is cradled in the crook of her arm, which is why his face has fallen into its repose. Jesus is dead, but he knows she has him. Theology says that — *consumatum est* — he gave himself over into the hands of his Father, but Michelangelo thinks otherwise, and what sixteen-year-old son would disagree? Who needs a father with a mother like this? The magic of the *Pietà* is in Mary's youth. The law of generation requires her to be at least middle-aged. In first-century Palestine, middle age would be old. But not here. Michelangelo's sculpture is luminous, as if lit from inside by her youth. It is the girl who glows. She has the complexion, the untouched lips, the swan-like, unwrinkled neck of a fifteen-year-old. She is Juliet holding naked Romeo, yet chastely. Death was the only consummation to touch this flesh. Yet the intimacy between these figures is entirely sensual.

At sixteen, I had already begun looking for a female of my own. Girls just like this one — whether picking up a dropped book in the school corridor, sipping a Coke at a drugstore fountain, or staring out from a shampoo ad in a magazine — were my obsession. I could not speak of it with Mom. I was aware of the curve of her figure, but incestuous longings were a mile below the surface. Yet I was acutely conscious of the sexual pull toward girls my age as a betrayal of her. I could not imagine abandoning

Mom to the heartless world of male power, even as represented by my good but mostly absent father. The welter of an adolescent's inner life boiled down to the fact that I had no idea yet how to be a man and a son both. What I had learned from my mother by then, though, was that no intense worry, not even if vaguely taboo, need be left outside a Catholic church. Why else do they have kneelers in front of the cross and every statue? Being sinners was what qualified us, and what was it to be a sinner if not lost like this, confused, afraid? These feelings, with their roil of sexual restlessness, were the heart of my first real prayer.

Michelangelo's Mary — the artist was twenty-four years old when he created her — soothed that unarticulated ache in me by being so simply a girl and a mother both. Her exquisite sexuality was fully robed against her son's nakedness, yet when has the inside of a wrist ever seemed more dangerously exposed? What face has ever been readier to be transported by ecstasy? Her sexuality combined with moral purity was an adolescent's ideal of hope. Grace and sin, hope and doom, love and fear — Michelangelo's Mary succeeds as the balance of such opposites because she is the incarnation of grief. That was surely what my mother recognized, and what, at bottom, I identified with. It would be years before my understanding could match that feeling — the grief I'd felt from the moment I left my mother's womb, a grief that, since I was no longer hers, she was already no longer mine. This is the slap from which we never recover, yet we never stop trying, especially in the longing known as sex.

Jesus in the cradle of his mother's arms: I knew from the familiar welling in Mom's eyes that what she saw in the scarred body was my brother's. That was no offense to me by then. She had her grief, I had mine. I would be a man someday. I would always be her son. So being next to her before such a thing was enough. Behind the *Pietà* was a huge cross, the naked wood of which seemed to miss him. Jesus had just been lowered from its arms into his mother's. The name of the *Pietà* chapel was *Cappella del Crocifisso*. The cross was a permanent presence behind us, too. It had focused the religious landscape through which Mom and I had moved the last two years, on those preliminary pilgrimages ahead of the military women. Our day trips through the Rhineland brought to a kind of climax our custom of intimate sojourn to various churches. By sheer coincidence, they gave me a personal stake, which I only now see, in the field of battle between the Church and the Jews. This reminiscence of my mother may seem a long way from that, but it is not.

Our house in Germany was about a mile from the Rhine, but decidedly, for us Catholics, on its wrong side. We lived in the town of Wiesbaden, directly across the river from Mainz, which, as the metropolitan see of the largest ecclesiastical province of the Holy Roman Empire and as home of the most powerful archbishop elector, was once known as “the Rome of the North.” The Mainz Cathedral, dating to the eleventh century, dramatically displayed the transition from Romanesque to Gothic to Baroque style, and its towers were long famous for stamping the city with Roman Catholic primacy. The several churches of Wiesbaden, on the other hand, were showily Protestant — brick instead of stone, solitary steeples instead of twin or triple towers, crosses without corpses. Our city’s *Dom* (“cathedral”), in effect, was the Spielbank, or casino, which, with the Kurhaus, or hot spring baths, had made Wiesbaden a favorite resort of the Prussian nobility. The architect of the lavish Kurhaus designed several other notable buildings in Wiesbaden, including the requisitioned mansion that the U.S. Air Force assigned to my father as his family quarters. One of the kaiser’s marshals had built it, we were told. The opulent digs were ours because of my father’s rank, but also because of my mother’s fertility: With five sons, our Irish Catholic family was too big for the houses on Generals’ Row at the air base. Unlike Mainz, a mere two miles away, Wiesbaden had not been bombed, which is why Eisenhower had made it his headquarters after crossing the Rhine in 1944. It had evolved into the headquarters of the U.S. Air Force in Europe (“U-Safe,” we said) when my father was named its chief of staff.

There were three places in the Rhineland to which our mother took us, all across the river: Cologne, for its cathedral and its precious relics; Koblenz, for nearby Maria Laach, the ancient Benedictine abbey; and Trier, which was significant to us as the site of the exquisite thirteenth-century *Liebfrauen-kirche*, but not even that was what brought us there.

The first major purchase my parents made in Germany was a tan VW convertible. My father was chauffeured in a blue Lincoln staff car with stars on the bumper, but the thrill of his status was matched by that of having a suddenly racy mother, liberated from the musty old Studebaker by that roadster Beetle. I still remember with pleasure my mother at the wheel of that car, with wisps of hair feathering out from her scarf as we bombed along the autobahn. She seemed another person from the grim worrier of my brother Joe’s illness only a few years before. Now one or two or all three of my younger brothers might be bundled into the back seat,

but with Joe away at college and Dad at work, there was no one to compete with me for riding shotgun. The wind feathered my hair too.

The trips along the Rhine were plunges into virtue and adventure both. We careered up the river valley, past hillside vineyards and cobblestoned villages, above island castles and below the fortresses of Rhenish barons. Passing the Lorelei, Mom would tell us the legend of the enchantress whose song lured boatmen onto the rocks. Passing the giant statue of Bismarck on a mountaintop, Mom would call it "the Watch on the Rhine," and we would joke that it was another of the clocks she'd taken to collecting. "Look at that!" she'd say, but what she meant was "Look at us!" If only the headset girls she had supervised at the phone company in the Loop could see her now!

Our visits to Cologne, perhaps four hours down the Rhine, were emblematic of all that was at stake for us. That city was living proof both of the savagery of which an unleashed America was capable — by 1945, 90 percent of Cologne's city center was reduced to rubble — and of our nation's sensitivity, for our skilled bombardiers had spared the great Cologne Cathedral, whose twin steeples, before the Eiffel Tower was erected in 1889, had been the tallest structures in the world. I would not realize it until years later, but one reason we drove all that way to Cologne, while almost never crossing into nearby Mainz, was that the even more sacred cathedral of Mainz had been half leveled by the same Allied bombers that spared Cologne's *Dom*. Even in 1959, a decade and a half after the destruction, the holy center of Mainz was not fully restored. We spared ourselves that refutation of American humaneness by pretending it was not there.

The other thing that took us to Cologne were the relics of the Three Kings, the Magi. Their bones were, and still are, enshrined in a triple pyramid of gold caskets on the high altar of the cathedral. How did the dust of Melchior, Balthazar, and Gaspar come to rest in that far city of Europe and not in Arabia, Mesopotamia, or Babylon? The answer hinges on the medieval politics of relics. Seeking to strengthen his hold on the northern realm, Frederick Barbarossa brought the remains of the Wise Men to Cologne in 1164. The subsequent influx of pilgrims, requiring the building of the new cathedral, lent prestige to the imperial center, solidifying its market and helping it to compete with Mainz and Trier. But where, twelve hundred years after the Epiphany, had Barbarossa obtained such relics? He found them in Milan, the imperial center to which they had been brought in the fourth century.

Around that time, the bones of saints and martyrs, and other relics, had

become central to the religious imagination of the Church. Things believed to be remnants of an earlier age, and associated with its heroes, enabled the faithful to feel connected to the sacred past, even to invoke its magical power. When Constantine was buried, twelve empty coffins were placed around his, one for each of the apostles. By the time his son died, the bones of several apostles had been “discovered” and brought to the imperial mausoleum.¹ Coffins no longer had to be empty. The Christian hunger for the Incarnate God spawned a hunger for nearly unlimited incarnations of holiness.

I remember a young American priest explaining about the bones of the Three Kings to my mother and me on our tour of the cathedral. What jolted me, and what ties the memory of my mother to the knot of this story, was that he credited the relics to the mother of Constantine, Saint Helena, a woman I had heard my mother speak of as the discoverer of the True Cross. Saint Helena had brought the bones of the Magi to Milan, the priest said, and her name made it seem true. As the priest walked us around that sanctuary, speaking of her — Helena was a general’s wife, like my mother — I felt the bond with my mother as something new.

The triple sarcophagus is large enough for adult corpses. It is elaborately gilded, bejeweled, and embossed with bas-relief biblical scenes. The crest of the city of Cologne bears three crowns, for this. How does an uncertain teenage boy dismiss such accumulated piety? There is a hint of the genius of the Catholic aesthetic in the tradition of reverence for relics, a manifestation of the deep sacredness of the flesh, a refusal to treat the wall separating the past from the present as impenetrable. The same human impulse leads Americans to honor Plymouth Rock and the flag of Betsy Ross. But what happens when reverence for relics becomes swamped by superstition, when the past is treated as infinitely malleable, depending on the needs of the present? Really — the Three Kings? I would surely have dismissed it except for that priest’s explanation. Saint Helena was an authenticating hook on which to hang any story, and people like us would believe it. If she had discovered the True Cross in Jerusalem, why could she not also have discovered corpses of the Three Kings in the same city? Saint Helena was central to the piety of Catholics of our kind. If you started to disbelieve her, where would you stop?

In addition to celebrating the virtue of omnipotent America, our pilgrimages through the Rhineland implicitly honored the heroic integrity of Roman Catholicism, which, we were assured, had never been sullied by the

Third Reich. We knew the Catholic Church as a staunch opponent of totalitarianism — in the 1950s, Pius XII was America's fiercest and most outspoken ally against Stalin. We all assumed that Catholics had bravely defied Adolf Hitler. That Hitler was born and had died a Catholic, even if only a nominal one, was never referred to. The living witness to Catholic virtue in Germany was the West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who ranked in the postwar pantheon with Charles de Gaulle and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Adenauer was a living refutation of the Soviet emphasis on pan-German culpability, as opposed to a narrow American emphasis on Nazi guilt. The American position suggested that there were relatively few Nazis, and they were all gone. We wanted a revived Germany to stand with us against Moscow, and Adenauer's roots in the Roman Catholic Christian Democratic Party — not the Social Democrats of, say, Willy Brandt — served that purpose.² I grasped little of this at the time, but I knew that Adenauer was a former mayor of Cologne and a staunch Rhinelander. He had had the new West German capital built in nearby Bonn. Such a commitment to a region we had adopted only made him, and his virtue, seem that much more like ours.

Adenauer was one of the reasons for our pilgrimage to Maria Laach, the Benedictine monastery about halfway between Wiesbaden and Cologne. In the western nave of the twelfth-century abbey church is displayed a modern stained-glass window showing figures from the Bible. The window is inscribed, *Dr. Konrad Adenauer, Bundeskanzler, 1956*. He donated the window to the abbey in gratitude that year because in 1933, after defying the newly empowered Hitler, and drawing down a death sentence on himself by refusing to fly the swastika in Cologne, he had taken refuge there. The abbot, Ildefons Herwegen, and Adenauer had gone to school together, and so the abbot had offered him refuge. Adenauer was able to melt into the monastic community. For most of a year, he hid in a monk's cell at Maria Laach, and he fled only when Herwegen alerted him that he was in danger of being found out. Ever after, the ancient abbey has been associated with Adenauer's anti-Nazi resistance. A film shown to visitors in the pilgrims' hall refers to the connection even today. We will return to this story later.

The nearby lake, which the monastery dedicates to Mary, is a water-filled volcanic crater, set dramatically in the Eifel Mountains a few miles back from the river. The abbey is a walled cluster of buildings in various styles several hundred yards up a gradual slope from the shoreline. Lush pastures and woodlands still in the abbey's domain surround the lake. For

more than a thousand years, with few breaks, monks have been chanting the office here. The pillared arcade at the entrance to the Romanesque chapel dates to the eleventh century, and is a source of our most cherished, if stereotyped, image of cloister architecture.

When my mother and I prayed at Maria Laach, we would have heard the Dialogue Mass, the liturgical innovation for which the abbey was then famous. It involved the congregation in the Eucharistic prayer, an antiphonal recitation of the Latin verses. In the 1950s the Dialogue Mass (*Missa Recitata*) was sweeping the Church, marking a shift away from clerical domination toward a more democratic expression in worship. Instead of being mere spectators to the priest's act, the people participated in it. The Body of Christ was all of us. Begun at the abbey decades before and championed by Maria Laach's foundation in the United States, St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, the Dialogue Mass was resisted by the Church's old guard, but its democratic impulse would be fulfilled by Vatican II in 1964, not only by its liturgical reform but by its new definition of the Church as the People of God.

My mother and I would have been oblivious of all this. I could handle the recitation, despite its being in Latin, because of my time as an altar boy, but my mother preferred her rosary. Neither of us could have been unmoved, however, by the mystical lilt of the monks' voices, the timeless quality of their chant, and its antiphonal rhythm with silence. Before coming to Germany, I had attended a Benedictine school in Washington, St. Anselm's, and even as a young teenager I had joined the Oblates, a lay affiliate, which entitled me to spend the night in the cloister on occasion, to eat with the monks at the narrow table of the refectory. I remember the dark bread, the porridge, and that no one sat across from you. I remember getting up before dawn to listen to the song of matins, an order of hours going back to the seventh century. I remember that I loved it.

I felt at home in monasteries, and I still do. A favorite, forever-repeated family story tells of the time my mother brought me to a monastery when I was five or six — this would have been to pray for Joe. And I said to a bald, bearded monk, "Why do you have hair on your chin but not on your head?" His answer, if he made one, was not a feature of the story. We always laughed at my innocent impudence, and I could always picture the arches of the cloister colonnade. Years later, I saw that the peculiar revelation of the story, apart from its dead-on notation of a monastic propensity for baldness, was that a child should have been in such a place at all. Yet what the monks offered me was a quickening of that religious imagi-

nation I had from her. Now I see that my mother's offer was being responded to. I was being subtly recruited in those places. In time I was conscripted by the Benedictines of St. Anselm's, and then, because I loved it at once, commissioned somehow by Maria Laach. Not many years later, when I entered the religious life, it was to build an identity around the mystery — brothers in the choir, the balance of solitude and solidarity; a devotion to art, architecture, song; a hint of anti-Hitler heroism that defused the hint of the effete — the mystery I had glimpsed at that German cloister.

Maria Laach was tied to the web of our Rhineland pilgrimages, too, in the chain of consequence that began with Helena, for it was founded in 1093 by monks from the Abbey of St. Maximin at Trier,³ which had been founded, in turn — yes, the tradition insists on this — by Constantine's mother.⁴ No one explained how a Benedictine monastery could have been established more than two hundred years before Benedict. The point for us was Helena — and Helena, beyond everything else, meant Trier. Because of her, we could go there, her hometown, and nearly touch what had touched the very flesh of the Lord, the son of Mary.

In previous chapters, we followed the story as it ran from Jesus through the first generations of his followers, whose claim to the mantle of Israel was denied by the followers of the rabbis. Jews and Christians coexisted both as rivals and as overlapping communities on the margins of the Roman Empire, but that all changed with Constantine. Politics and theology were fluid until then, but boundaries were suddenly defined around the grid of the True Cross. A symbol then and ever after associated with Helena, it now became the touchstone of membership, not only in the Church but in the empire. That made it the touchstone of survival. Saint Ambrose, the greatest theologian of the age, would use the True Cross explicitly against the Jews, finally urging violence as the proper response to their denial of Christian claims. Saint Augustine, the protégé of Ambrose, would demur, and Jews would live, but only in a certain way — one that stamps history still. All of this unfolds from where I stood, knowing nothing, in Trier.

The Story of Constantine

CAESAR AUGUSTUS DID not reach the Elbe, but his armies, and those of his immediate successors, planted the Roman standard all over Europe west of the Rhine, through central Europe south of the Danube, into the Near East, and in North Africa along the southern edge of the Mediterranean. These conquests would not be expanded upon, and indeed, from the first century on, the posture of Roman legions was defensive, largely holding on to what had been won. For nearly two hundred years, until the beginning of the third century, the Roman world was more or less orderly and prosperous. Spurred by the efficiencies of Roman transportation and communications, much of northern and western Europe was brought into a regional economy of trade, industry, and finance. But such consolidation brought its own stresses. Because the military was so well established throughout most of the empire, more and more power shifted to the armies. The makeup of the legions, meanwhile, had become less and less Roman, as the “barbarians” of the provinces and frontiers filled out the ranks, and ultimately the officer corps.

The third century was a period of civil war, barbarian invasion, and general social breakdown throughout the empire. As chaos mounted, so did the power of the military, which successfully asserted authority over the Roman Senate, and even over the seat of the emperors, who came and went so quickly (twenty between 235 and 284) that they were unable to establish power centers of their own. Rebellious generals and self-anointed general-emperors became features of the time. Militarization eclipsed all other aspects of Roman culture. Intellectual life collapsed, and the skills of classical art were lost. Archaeologists studying Rome from the early third century on, for example, find few inscriptions on public buildings and monuments.

Late in the third century, a general named Aurelius Valerius Diocletian, a commoner from Illyria, in the Balkan peninsula, was declared emperor by his soldiers. In 284, his claim was widely recognized, and he immediately applied what would prove to be his administrative genius to the task of drawing order out of the chaos into which the empire had fallen. In 285, Diocletian divided the empire in half, assigning the more vital and less conflicted East to himself, and taking the title Augustus. The thrust of his dividing line, running south from the Danube, is still more or less visible today on the much disputed border between the Roman Catholic territories of Croatia and the Orthodox territories of Serbia. Diocletian established his seat of government at Nicomedia, on the eastern side of the Bosphorus.

As for the West, he designated as his fellow Augustus one of his fellow generals, Maximian. The idea was that each Augustus would be equal to the other, but in fact Diocletian was supreme. Each of the two Augusti had a deputy, with the title Caesar, with authority over a further division of the empire and a presumed right of succession to the office of Augustus. With four rulers in place, the period of Rome's tetrarchy had begun. It was an experiment in administration that would not last. Diocletian's Caesar was Galerius, who ruled in the East. Maximian named a general of the legions in Gaul, Constantius, who ruled from a capital at Trier. Maximian established himself not in Rome but in Milan, because it was closer to the threatened Alpine frontier of Italy. A military purpose thus dictated the momentous shift away from the ancient capital, but this is not surprising, since the entire rearrangement of power presumed the consent not of the Senate or of the citizenry, but of the armies.

At this point, therefore, the court of the emperor left Rome, never to return. Meanwhile, Christianity had grown, but slowly, with most of its converts being drawn from the lower classes of the Mediterranean world. The population of the Roman Empire in late antiquity is usually given as between fifty and sixty million.¹ Christians accounted for perhaps a tenth of that number.² From the early informality of a house-based network of communities that had sprung up in the generations after the Gospels were written down, and partly because those texts, once canonized, served as an organizing structure, the early Jesus movement had developed, probably by the mid to late second century, into something we can call the Church. It had imitated the highly efficient political system of the empire, dividing itself into dioceses and provinces, with local bishops serving as ecclesiastical equivalents of regional governors.³ The Church had defined Rome as

its administrative seat — a decision tied as much to organizational as to religious demands, even if the ancient connection to Peter was always emphasized.

In the late third century, Christians were a distinct minority in Rome, but the city was riven with factions of every kind. With the emperor gone, the influence of the Christian bishop, revered as the successor to Peter, would only grow. But there was another reason that power might flow to the Church at this time. Despite the fact that most Christians were of the illiterate poor, the Church had grounded itself in the studious work of an intellectual elite. The great exception to the third-century decline of intellect and culture in the Roman Empire had been the flourishing of Christian theology, with such figures as Tertullian (c. 150–225), Cyprian (c. 200–258), and Origen (c. 182–251). These and other thinkers transformed Christianity's self-understanding by applying the categories of the classics to affirmations grounded in Scripture. Thinkers like these flourished in Alexandria and Antioch, less so in Rome. In the intellectual ferment of the period, a variety of sometimes conflicting interpretations of the meaning of Jesus Christ took hold, but to outsiders the Church, with its common Eucharistic liturgy, its defined canon of sacred texts, and the relatively clear, if diffuse, hierarchy based on numerous bishoprics, appeared to be monolithic. These institutional innovations served the Church well in times of oppression, and would do so even more when it came into power.

Like Judaism, Christianity was a religion of the One God. Jews and Christians were equally determined to refrain from participation in the cult rituals of Rome's pagan civic religion. But going back to the first century B.C.E., Jews had been exempted from the requirements to offer sacrifices to and utter blessings in the name of pagan gods. When the Church grew apart from the synagogue, Christians lost that exemption, which posed a growing problem as the emperors themselves began, in the third century, to claim the prerogatives of deity. Jews were also exempt from military service, but Christians were not. Church members who were in the army, in particular, could face impossible pressures to drop incense in the bowl or put an offering of a bird on the fire. The religion of Mithras, a Persian god, had become popular in the military, and as the army's power grew — there were half a million men under arms by now — Christian soldiers found themselves pressed by their officers to participate in that cult, too. In general, they refused. The Church remembers this refusal as having resulted in a long tradition of martyrdom in ancient times, but in fact, violent oppression of Christians was relatively rare and sporadic.

There was a persecution under the emperor Decius (249–251).⁴ Another began in 303, when Diocletian, as a part of his overall attempt to impose order, declared a crackdown on Christians, whose dissent could seem like atheism. He also ordered the destruction of all Christian churches and texts.⁵ The destruction of churches was so widespread in the East in this period that archaeology tells us little or nothing about their design.⁶ Under Diocletian, Christians were liable to be put to death almost anywhere in the empire, with the exception of the northwestern provinces over which Constantius ruled. This was probably because the Church in Gaul, Germania, and Britain was far less well established than in the East, but also because, as the general of an army made up in large part of tribal recruits who maintained loyalty to their own gods and cults, Constantius had learned the value of religious tolerance.

Judaism had found its own place in the empire, with concentrations of Jews to be found nearly everywhere. There were, by the beginning of the fourth century, something like a minimum of three million Jews, so their number, while probably less than that of the Christians, was still substantial. Two thirds of that figure lived east of the Balkan peninsula.⁷ Jews lived in cities, especially Alexandria and Carthage, as well as Rome and the urban centers of Asia Minor. They also pursued agriculture in fertile areas like the river valleys of Mesopotamia and along the Nile. Many of these Jews were Hellenized, speaking the language of their neighbors and interacting with Christians and pagans. As we saw earlier, up until late antiquity, there was far more fluidity among these communities than is ordinarily imagined. We can presume that Hellenized Jewish communities were as intellectually and culturally vital as any. As in Christianity, the canonization of sacred texts had spawned among Jews a culture of text study and interpretation,⁸ but it is a mystery that these Jews left almost no written records of their religious and cultural life. “After 100 C.E.,” in the words of one historian of ancient Judaism, the Jews of the Hellenized Diaspora “appear to have become illiterate . . . Greek-speaking Jews read the Bible in Greek . . . but were not inspired thereby to write. Why, we do not know.”⁹

The story was very different in the communities of rabbinic Jews concentrated in what from Rome could seem the backwaters of Palestine, in what had been known as Judea and Galilee.¹⁰ An emblem of Jewish survival was the story told about the Pharisaic leader Yochanan ben Zakkai, who had been spirited out of the besieged city of Jerusalem inside a coffin. He had set up his community at Yavneh, on the Mediterranean coast, and,

as we saw earlier, a rabbinic academy had flourished there.¹¹ By 300, the great literary tradition of Mishnah was well established. Throughout the preceding period of violence and dispersal, Jewish scholars and scribes, working quietly in schools under the leadership of a succession of prominent rabbis, based in Babylonia and Palestine, painstakingly recorded the oral traditions of commentary and law. The collected writings of the Mishnah were codified in the late fourth century, and they would spawn the further elaborations of Gemara, and the whole would ultimately be collected as the Talmud. In this way the spiritual legacy of Israel was not only preserved but built upon. Hebrew and Aramaic were the main languages used in these pursuits, but Greek, Latin, and Persian references in the ancient texts make it clear that translation was a central skill and that exchange with surrounding cultures was common. The rabbinic texts provide evidence of a rich, erudite communal life built around the study of Torah. As Christians revered their martyrs, rabbinic Jews revered their sages. Torah study, not open defiance of Roman religious cult, was what gave Judaism lasting strength. Indeed, Jews had less reason to resist than Christians. In addition to the exemptions from military service and pagan cult, Jews living in the communities of the rabbis exercised considerable autonomy, with a Roman-recognized Jewish patriarchate based in Palestine.

Thus, while both Christians and Jews consistently rejected all association with the pagan religions of Rome, Jews enjoyed a higher level of tolerance by the empire. Why is that? The answer involves a range of factors — for example, Judaism's status as an ancient religion set it apart from upstart cults — but perhaps one defining difference stands above others. Once the Church understood Jesus Christ as God-made-man, it seemed a corollary that all human beings were called to be united with him. Wasn't that why Jesus was remembered, in Matthew, as having commanded, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations"?¹² Christian theology evolved in such a way that primary emphasis was given to the Church as the community of the saved. The affirmation that all who were baptized in Christ had access to God came to be understood exclusively — that *only* those who were baptized could be saved. This notion underwrote Christianity's aggressive program of proselytizing, which led to the Church's steady growth, but it also was the source of offense taken by Roman pagans who regarded such a theology as an intolerable violation of a necessary religious tolerance.

Rabbinic Judaism had no notion of God-made-man. "In Jewish

thought, God stayed strictly separate from man," Alan Segal wrote, "just as the Jews stayed strictly separate from Gentiles. For the Jews, purity categories could remain strong without sacrificing universality because, when Jews distinguished between themselves and the Gentiles, they were not distinguishing between the saved and the damned."¹³ Roman pagans could accept the walls Jews erected between themselves and "impure" cults, strict Jewish marriage laws, and even prohibitions against taking meals with non-Jews, because such boundaries did not imply an assumption that pagans were damned. Jews engaged in proselytizing in the ancient world, but not for the reasons that Christians did. Soon enough, Jewish proselytizing would become illegal, Jewish distinctiveness would offend, and Jewish autonomy would be abolished.

In 305, Diocletian, sixty years old, abdicated the imperial throne — probably a signal of his serious purpose as a reforming ruler. He imposed the same decision on Maximian, his counterpart in the West. Constantius and Galerius became Augusti. To tie himself to the emperor's court in Milan, Constantius had divorced Helena, of whom we have already taken note, and married Maximian's daughter Theodora. Yet Constantius was still more the rough soldier than the courtly emperor; soon after his ascension to the rank of Augustus, he led his legions into Britain to maintain control over the island's perennially unruly natives. While there, in 306, Constantius was taken ill. He died at York. At his side was his son Constantine, who is commonly said to have been about eighteen years old. He was described by contemporaries as a large, impressive-looking man, and he certainly had impressed his father's troops. They spontaneously hailed him as the successor to Constantius, the Augustus of the Western empire. But in Rome, Maximian disavowed his forced abdication to reassert his claim to the position.

Constantine would have none of that. He ensconced himself in Trier, quickly consolidated his control over the northern legions, and ordered construction of a palace fit for a Roman emperor — the *Konstantin-basilika* referred to earlier. And he laid plans to take on Maximian.

Thus begins the remarkable story of the reign of the man who transformed the Roman Empire, the Church, and the place of Jews. As usually told, the story is quickly summarized.¹⁴ A threatened Maximian sued for peace, displaying a surprising deference by coming to Trier to confer with Constantine. In 307, the wily Constantine recognized Maximian as senior Augustus, and sealed the arrangement by marrying another of Maximian's daughters, Fausta. He was prepared to wait to assume full

control in the West. But the next year, Maximian's son Maxentius, seeing himself shunted aside, staked his own claim to be emperor of the West. Maximian, understandably, faltered in his deal with Constantine, who was quick to take offense. Their armies met in battle at Marseilles in 310. Constantine was victorious. He killed Maximian. In 312, Constantine stormed Italy, moving against Maxentius's army, fortified in Rome. The story is that Constantine's legions were spent by now, demoralized, and uncertain so far from home. In the coming battle against Maxentius, who would be fighting on his home ground, they would be the decided underdog. But the night before the battle at the Milvian Bridge, on the Tiber, Constantine saw a cross in the sky, above the legend *In Hoc Signo Vinces* ("In This Sign, Conquer"). With the news of this vision, a signal of favor from the Christian God, Constantine's troops rallied, went firmly into battle the next day, and won. Constantine himself threw Maxentius off the bridge into the Tiber, where he drowned. On the strength of that vision, and its fulfillment, the emperor became a Christian, so did his army, and, ultimately, so did the empire.

In a way, this is the second-greatest story ever told, at least concerning what we think of as Western civilization. After the death and Resurrection of Jesus, the conversion of Constantine may have been the most implication-laden event in Western history. If we rarely think so, that is because we take utterly for granted the structures of culture, mind, politics, spirituality, and even calendar (Sunday as holiday) to which it led. None of those structures was foreordained, and indeed, to grasp the epoch-shaping significance of Constantine's embrace of Jesus, his sponsorship of Jesus' cause, imagine how the history we trace in this book would have unfolded had the young emperor been converted to Judaism instead. It is a nearly unthinkable turn in the story, imagined in retrospect, but in prospect such a conversion would have been no more unlikely than what happened, and to entertain the idea is to wonder how Judaism, instead of Catholicism, would have fared as the locus of political and religious dominance. When the power of the empire became joined to the ideology of the Church, the empire was immediately recast and reenergized, and the Church became an entity so different from what had preceded it as to be almost unrecognizable. It goes without saying that the conversion of Constantine, for Church and empire both, led to consequences better and worse — although not for Jews, for whom, from this, nothing good would come.

The Cross and the Religious Imagination

CHRISTIANITY and Judaism are religions of revelation. But how, exactly, is the content of our beliefs revealed? It is a long time since we took for granted the idea of theophany, a sudden and dramatic unveiling of mystery — an experience like that of Moses before the burning bush, or Moses coming down from the mountaintop with the tablets of the Law. One of the assumptions I make in a work like this, however, is that the truth of our beliefs is revealed in history, within the contours of the mundane, and not through cosmic interruptions in the flow of time. Revelation comes to us gradually, according to the methods of human knowing. And so revelation comes to us ambiguously. Certitude and clarity are achieved only in hindsight, and even then provisionally. That is the work of memory, which is the arrangement of incident and experience into a meaningful narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. The theophany of Moses is less a matter of what happened to him on Mount Sinai than it is of the story told by those who came after him.

The great question for Christians is, How is Jesus God? It can come as no surprise to one for whom revelation is a profoundly human, and therefore timebound, way of knowing to realize that the Jesus movement only gradually came to ask that question. It applied categories of divinity to him through the turmoil of argument, guesswork, estimation, imprecise language, and error far more than through sudden inspiration from above. For religious inspiration, like all things in history, evolves over time.

However gradually it takes shape, the painstaking construction of a commonly held narrative involves an ultimate recognition, which can in-

deed seem to be a sudden lifting of fog — Joyce's epiphany again — before a new kind of knowing. Such a recognition of the basic content of belief in Jesus occurred in the fourth century when, at last, a formerly divided, contentious, widely dispersed Christianity achieved agreement on an answer to the question How is this man God? That breakthrough in theology, honored in a creed that is still recited around the globe in every hour of every day, was accompanied by, enabled by, a breakthrough in the social organization of a formerly divided, contentious, widely dispersed Roman Empire. For political as well as religious reasons, the revelation came decisively to the pagan population too. Jesus is God in the way Emperor Constantine says he is.

Constantine wanted to unify the empire in every way. When he declared a freeze on wages and prices to control inflation, a chaotic system of competing local economies began to operate as one. When he ordered workers to remain in their fathers' occupations as a way of assuring basic services, from the bakery to the blacksmith shop, the social order coalesced. In a similar way, Constantine was the instrument of a revolution in the religious imagination of the Mediterranean world, and eventually of Europe. His political impact on Christianity is widely recognized, but his role as a shaper of its central religious idea is insufficiently appreciated. Latin Christians, anachronistically, have preferred to keep him, as a ruler, on the secular side of the sacred-profane divide, as if he were an early Charlemagne. In the Eastern Church, he is honored as a saint, but even there his role in shaping a new religious consciousness is downplayed. But at the time, Constantine was a kind of, well, Moses — an image I would not presume to apply to him. It originates with Eusebius of Caesarea, his biographer.¹

Eusebius (c. 260–c. 339), the bishop of Caesarea, was born before Constantine and died after him. He is sometimes called the father of Church history. The author of several important works, especially *History*, the earliest telling of the ascendancy of the Church, he is usually a reliable recorder in the mode of Josephus.² But his *Life of Constantine* is a celebration of the divinely ordained union of the Church and the empire — Constantine as Moses — and not in any way an objective work of biography. Thus, for example, Eusebius emphasizes Constantine's youth when he takes his father's place at the head of the rough northern legion, as if he were aged eighteen or so, barely a man, and that is the age I cited in my summary of the story of Constantine. Some sources say he was about twenty-five. He was probably nearer thirty,³ but the challenges he faced

would have been daunting no matter how old he was. His ultimate achievement suggests that even Eusebius's obsequious praise may not have exaggerated his strengths — saying nothing here about his virtues.

Around the figure of the famously converted emperor, in partnership with his mother, developed a new notion not merely of the Church, as has often been noted, but of Jesus himself — of the kind of God he is. Theologians, as if by imperial fiat — or rather, precisely *by* such fiat — now found ways to put the heretofore ineffable mystery into words, while liturgists gave it expression by moving a peripheral symbol into the dead center of the cult. A previously inchoate feel for the identity of Jesus became sharply defined from now on.

The content of that definition is important for our purposes, because at this time it also emerges, in theology and cult both, that the default custodians of the *proof* of the truth of this more fully realized revelation about Jesus, after all these years and still, are none other than the Jews. In the fourth and early fifth centuries, beginning with Constantine and ending with the great theologian Augustine, heretofore marginal Judaism (marginal to the Church, that is) became central to the argument and language of a renewed Christian proclamation. The foundation of the conflict between Christians and Jews was laid, as we saw, in the first decade after the death of Jesus — that “healing circle.” In subsequent centuries, its structure took shape behind “the clumsy scaffolding of Hebrew prophecies,” in the words of Augustine's most admired biographer, Peter Brown.⁴ But the post and beam of the conflict, as would become so clear in a field by a wall in Poland at the end of the twentieth century, was the cross.

Before Constantine, the cross lacked religious and symbolic significance. Paul had made the crucifixion essential to the salvation earned by Christ's death; being “crucified with Christ”⁵ was an implication of accepting faith. But even in Paul, the cross as such did not compete, for instance, with the waters of baptism as the Christian community's metaphoric representation of dying with Christ. As he put it, “All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.”⁶ The Gospel of John has water flow from the side of Jesus after he has been pierced, a clear symbol of baptism.⁷ Water had a vivid hold on the Christian imagination; wood did not. The fathers of the Church followed Paul in developing the idea of salvation through the death of Christ, but Justin, for example, even in discussing the cross, keeps it at a metaphoric remove by seeing it more as the shape of Passover blood on the lintel than as the literal execution device.⁸ The blood of Christ, yes. The cross, not so much.

Thus, on the walls of the catacombs in Rome prior to the fourth century were to be seen representations of palm branches, the dove, the peacock, the bird of paradise, or the monogram of Jesus.⁹ The sacred fish was a favorite symbol because of Gospel scenes, but also because the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, renders an acrostic of “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”¹⁰ Such symbols were ubiquitous in early Christianity, but the cross is simply not to be found among them. Some early Christians signed themselves, touching the forehead, shoulders, and breast, but even that is ambiguous, since, as we saw, Jews were known to make a similar sign.

The place of the cross in the Christian imagination changed with Constantine. “He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline” — this is Eusebius’s account of Constantine’s own report of what he saw in the sky on the eve of battle above the Milvian Bridge — “he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription CONQUER BY THIS.”¹¹ The story goes on to say that Constantine then assembled his army — “He sat in the midst of them, and described to them the figure of the sign he had seen”¹² — and gave them the new standard to carry into battle. “Now it was made in the following manner. A long spear, overlaid with gold, formed the figure of the cross by means of a transverse bar laid over it.” As we saw, the army behind this standard did conquer, and Constantine, so Eusebius heard him say, was thus convinced of the truth of Christianity. “The emperor constantly made use of this sign of salvation as a safeguard against every adverse and hostile power, and commanded that others similar to it should be carried at the head of all his armies.”¹³

Some early versions of the legend of Constantine’s conversion had described the miraculous vision as having been not of a cross but of the Chi-Rho, the monogram composed of the first two letters of the Greek word *Khristos*. This version of the story would have been in keeping with the ancient Christian reluctance to render the cross literally, as the gibbet on which Jesus had hung. But from Eusebius’s account, not of the vision but of Constantine’s own description of it, the actual “figure of the cross” is clearly what is meant. Constantine put the Roman execution device, now rendered with a spear, at the center not only of the story of his conversion to Christianity, but of the Christian story itself.

When the death of Jesus — rendered literally, in all its violence, as opposed to metaphorically or theologically — replaced the life of Jesus and the new life of Resurrection at the heart of the Christian imagination, the balance shifted decisively against the Jews. This was so because sole re-

sponsibility for that now pivotal death had long since been laid at their feet.¹⁴ For our purposes, the Age of Constantine can be said to extend from 306, when he replaced his father as one of the tetrarchy's four caesars, until 429, when a Constantinian successor, following in a direct chain of political and theological consequence, abolished the patriarchate of Israel.¹⁵ Not even the caesars, who twice leveled Jerusalem, had thus eliminated Jewish political autonomy — an abolition that would not be reversed until 1948. One could almost say that for Jews, the Age of Constantine came to an end only with David Ben Gurion.

That pivotal 125 years not only illuminates the conflict between Christians and Jews, but escalates it. In the new era, Christians went from being 10 percent of the empire,¹⁶ a despised and violently persecuted minority, to being its solid majority. Christianity went from being a private, apolitical movement to being the shaper of world politics. The status of Judaism was similarly reversed, from a licit self-rule, a respected exception within a sea of paganism, to a state of highly vulnerable disenfranchisement. What might be called history's first pogrom, an organized violent assault on a community of Jews, because they were Jews, took place in Alexandria in 414, wiping out that city's Jewish community for a time. Even in Palestine, Jews became a besieged minority. The land of Israel, long ignored by Christians who had happily left it behind for the centers of the empire, now became known as the Christian Holy Land. Christians returned to it, not for the last time, with a vengeance.

Jerusalem, a long-neglected backwater still known by its Roman name, Aelia Capitolina, again became the spiritual navel of the world. "Jerusalem," Augustine would say, "with my heart stretching out in longing for it, Jerusalem my country, Jerusalem my mother."¹⁷ Even the Temple returned briefly as an emblem of faith, only to be superseded yet again — its ancient wall a screen onto which new meanings could be projected. For Jews, in the words of Jacob Neusner, "The world now had passed into the hands of their rivals, their siblings, sharing Scripture, sharing a claim to be 'Israel,' sharing the same view of history, sharing the same expectation of the Messiah's coming."¹⁸ For Christians, the dramatic and unexpected conversion of Constantine was a proof of the Church's proclamation, but the change of fortune it led to was proof of even more. "The creation of the Christian state," Neusner says, "claiming to carry forward the ancient Israelite state, and to appeal to its precedents, brought to a critical stage the long-term Christian claim that Christians formed the new Israel."¹⁹

But if the Christian stake to that claim was now decisively driven in,

what was to be made of — done with — the survivors of that old Israel who stubbornly refused to disappear? The problem was complex. When Christianity was finally in a position to present itself on favorable terms to the pagan world, it was important to be able to do so not as an upstart religion but as the fulfillment of an ancient tradition, one that predated pagan heroes like Cicero, Socrates, Homer. Christians had no choice but to invoke their Jewish provenance, but that raised another problem. What were pagans to make of the clear rejection of those same Christian claims by Jews? How could the Gospel base its validity on its being the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, yet be repudiated by the holders of title to that prophecy?

Pagans were right to wonder. This Jewish recalcitrance threatened the project of Christian expansion — not in a new way exactly, but, in the changed circumstance, more powerfully than ever before. The other new circumstance, of course, was that now Christians were also in a position to do something about it, since their program of expansion was sponsored by the emperor, whose army marched behind that spear with its transverse bar. The gradual closing of the imperial vise on Judaism²⁰ — from Constantine's edict in 315 making it a crime for Jews to proselytize to the edict almost a century later making it a crime punishable by death — was driven by the real problem that Jewish dissent from Christian claims made overcoming paganism far more difficult. In addition to the vexation it caused among pagans, Jewish dissent constantly threatened to undermine the devotion of the many Christians who continued to value the Jewish roots of faith in the One God. Indeed, in an age marked by aggressive persecution of heresies — one bishop catalogued 156 of them²¹ — the original heresy was understood to be derived from Judaism itself.²² Jews posed a threat from within the faith as much as from outside it.

This resonates with Nirenberg
on Islam and jewish enmity

The Vision of Constantine

THE MOMENTOUS SHIFT in the delicate balance between Jews and Christians, a shift in the moral imagination of the West, began in the *Aula Palatina*, the basilica or imperial palace Constantine had constructed for himself at the outset of his rule. He had set out to impress, and did. "For no one was comparable to him for grace and beauty of person, or height of stature," Eusebius explains, "and he so far surpassed his compeers in personal strength as to be a terror to them. He was, however, even more conspicuous for the excellence of his mental qualities than for his superior physical endowments; being gifted in the first place with a sound judgment, and having also reaped the advantages of a liberal education. He was also distinguished in no ordinary degree both by natural intelligence and divinely imparted wisdom."¹

Here we see Eusebius at work not as a historian but as the emperor's mythmaker. In fact, the entire story of Constantine, as rehearsed above, comes to us half cloaked in myth, but much of it was self-created. From the start, Constantine wanted to be taken as a man with a mandate from the gods. In large things and small, he declared his purpose and revealed its scope. For example, upon succeeding his father, he immediately ordered new coins struck at the mints he controlled in Trier, London, and Lyons, changing the inscription from the traditional "To the Genius of the Roman people" to "To the Unconquered Sun my companion."² Constantine's overlapse sense of himself was nowhere more clearly manifest than in the palace he ordered built in Trier, a complex of numerous buildings attached to a massive throne room and audience hall. Such a palace was less an indulgence than a statement, for Trier was now to be an imperial capital fit for the ruler of the Roman world, not a barbaric northern outpost. The *Aula Palatina* was the perfect symbol of his purpose, a foreshadowing of his bold program.

The throne room remains. It is more than two hundred feet long and nearly one hundred feet high and wide. Its walls once would have been elaborately decorated, and the floor an intricately patterned mosaic. Today the stark purity of stripped hewn stone, emphasized by the clear glass panes of thirty huge arching windows, makes as much of an impression as a riot of color ever could have. To stand in the audience hall — having been gutted by bombing and fire during World War II, it was restored, as noted, in the 1950s — is to feel the capaciousness of Constantine's ambition. As mentioned earlier, my mother and I did not enter this magnificent relic during my visits in the late 1950s. Its designation as a Lutheran place of worship, which Protestant Prussians had imposed on it during the nineteenth-century Kulturkampf, had kept it off our pious Catholic itinerary. The Lutherans occupy the place lightly: a very large gilded cross is suspended in the apse, as if in the sky, but otherwise the space evokes empire more than church. It is easy to imagine a throne where the altar is.

How overpowering it must have been to traverse that enormous open space, approaching the Augustus. The hall itself — the great rounded arch of the apse, the double row of windows, the thick stone walls, the distance from the small entrance to the imperial seat — would have made a supplicant of everyone who crossed it. And wouldn't that have been the point? Almost nothing remains of Constantine's magnificent palace in Istanbul,³ but this basilica in now obscure Trier stands essentially as he made it, a true relic of his rule. That is as it should be, despite the surpassing prestige of those other cities, since it was here that his stature first revealed itself beyond the circle of his father's soldiers. "In short, as the sun, when he rises upon the earth, liberally imparts his rays of light to all, so did Constantine, proceeding at early dawn from the imperial palace . . ." This is the propagandist Eusebius, but the *Palatina* suggests that even this verbosity accurately evokes the impression he'd have made, going out from here. ". . . and rising as it were with the heavenly luminary, impart the rays of his own beneficence to all who came into his presence."⁴

It is impossible to stand under the magnificent coffered ceiling and not see a throng of togas, great ladies in diadems lining the heated walls, bowing at his arrival. Below them, in subterranean caverns, slaves would have labored at boilers to heat the mosaic tiles on which he walked, creating an artificial climate intended to make chilly Trier feel like Rome. Every effort would have gone to enhance the impression made by this one man, and from what followed, we know that it all succeeded. "And now, all rising at the signal which indicated the emperor's entrance" — this is Eusebius

describing an arrival that he witnessed — “at last he himself proceeded through the midst of the assembly, like some heavenly messenger of God, clothed in raiment which glittered as it were with rays of light, reflecting the glowing radiance of a purple robe, and adorned with the brilliant splendor of gold and precious stones. Such was the external appearance of his person; and with regard to his mind, it was evident he was distinguished by piety and godly fear. This was indicated by his downcast eyes, the blush on his countenance, and his gait. For the rest of his personal excellencies, he surpassed all present in height of stature and beauty of form, as well as in majestic dignity of mien, and invincible strength and vigor.”⁵

To a world threatened by dissolution, the unifying impulse can only seem virtuous, yet the perennial human problem is how to keep the ideal of unity free of the burden of tyranny, and that problem reached a point of crisis in the Age of Constantine. For him, unification was by definition a matter of domination. And that played itself out in the wars he waged against his rivals. But military domination was only part of his agenda. At a deeper level, he wanted a spiritual domination too, and a fuller sense of that background can help us see his conversion to Christianity in 312 in a clearer light.

After he defeated his wife's father, Maximian, at Marseilles in 310, Constantine's fortunes were already being raised to the divine. On the way back to Trier from Marseilles, he stopped at the pagan temple in Autun a moment, before the oracle that Eusebius enshrines: “O Constantine, you saw, I believe, your protector Apollo, in company with Victory, offering you laurel crowns . . . You really saw the god, and recognized yourself in the appearance of one to whom the prophecies of poets have declared that the rule of the whole world should belong.”⁶ News of this vision, with its implication of heavenly anointing by Apollo, who was identified with the sun god,⁷ would have been spread far and wide by Constantine's panegyrist. As the historian of antiquity Averil Cameron points out, such claiming favor of the pagan gods offers the context in which to see the story of his subsequent vision at Milvian Bridge. Caesars had habitually declared special sponsorship by gods, but in this era, the meaning of such piety was changing. The coming to the fore of Christian ideas was only part of a larger religious revolution, which our own simplistic notions of paganism fall short of explaining. For example, it is significant that Constantine's coins stated his devotion to the Unconquered Sun. *Sol Invictus* had already come to be understood, in a proclamation by the emperor Aurelian in 274, as “the one universal Godhead,” as the historian J.N.D. Kelly sum-

marized it, "which, recognized under a thousand names, revealed Itself most fully and splendidly in the heavens."⁸ The Roman cult of the sun god, as the supreme being, already manifested a movement toward monotheism, and it means everything that Constantine's own instinctive piety, both as a pagan and as a converted Christian, should have had as its constant vision the bright light in the sky. Monotheism is regarded as having strictly herded pagans to one side and Christians and Jews to the other, but definitions at the time were anything but strict.⁹ What never varied in Constantine's otherwise fluid religious self-understanding, something that carried over from Apollo to Christ, was that it was divinely commissioned "that the rule of the whole world should belong" to him.¹⁰

Of course others felt the same way — for example, Maxentius, the son of Maximian who, after Marseilles, took his father's place at war with Constantine. Like his father before him, Maxentius affiliated himself with the demigod Hercules.¹¹ Constantine's putative association with the superior Sol was another kind of usurpation: The contest between the human rivals was also now a contest between their sponsoring deities — just like the contest between Moses and Pharaoh with which the saga of the One God began. Maxentius controlled Rome, and that was what Constantine wanted next. The legend of Milvian Bridge says that Constantine was moving against an overwhelmingly superior force, that when his vision of the cross promised victory, such an outcome was unlikely. The legendary vision thus made the contest one between the Christian God and the Roman gods.

"The gods of Rome, then, had declared for Maxentius; whence in this crisis should Constantine seek aid?" This account of the legend, written in 1931 by N. H. Baynes, breathlessly renders the tale on which I was raised, and which we saw in summary in the previous chapter. "Against the advice of his generals, against the counsel of the augurs, with amazing daring Constantine invaded Italy."¹² He knew from his vision that he had more than a chance; he had a mandate. But it depended on his putting his faith, at last, in Jesus Christ. That is why he raised the cross on a spear. Commenting on Baynes's version of the traditional account, T. D. Barnes dismisses it as "a boy's adventure story."

An alternative narration, preferred by Barnes and most scholars now, debunks key elements of the legend and the uses to which it has been put. Approaching Rome, Constantine was no underdog. He knew that Maxentius, whose army had been decimated in an earlier battle in Verona, had no chance. In a superior position, Constantine denounced his rival

as a bastard and no true ruler.¹³ The battle at the Tiber was a predictable rout, with Maxentius unable even to mount an orderly retreat. As he withdrew across the Milvian Bridge — which was in fact a jury-rigged pontoon construction — he fell into the river. He died, perhaps by drowning. Constantine may or may not have ordered it, but his wife's brother's head was carried through the city on a pike.¹⁴ It may indeed be that Constantine entered Rome with an army bearing the cross, although some contemporary accounts attribute his victory to intervention by pagan deities,¹⁵ and others are vague in identifying his religious association. The inscription on the Arch of Constantine, which was erected within three years of the battle and still stands near the Colosseum, cites victory only "by the inspiration of the divinity."¹⁶

Although a public conversion to a despised religion on the eve of battle might be considered supernaturally motivated maverick politics on Constantine's part, there are compelling reasons to think it would have been infinitely shrewd. Remember that Diocletian's order that Christian churches be burned had been issued only in 303. Since then, the persecution had eased, but Christian property was still in danger of being confiscated. Though it served Constantine's later purpose to have emphasized how threatened Christians were before his coming, especially in Maxentius's Italy,¹⁷ it seems clear that a true state of Christian dispossession played a part in shaping his strategy in 312. If Constantine was to succeed in imposing authority on a restless Roman populace whose loyalties were divided among contending tetrarchs, he needed a political base within the city. His arrival behind the standard of Christ would have instantly given him one — among Christians. They were a minority, but a well-organized one, and no claimant had the allegiance of a majority. Fierce Christian devotion to a conqueror whose miraculous conversion proved the truth of their faith would have made Christians powerful political allies.

Within a year of Milvian Bridge, Constantine controlled the entire Western empire. His one remaining rival was Licinius, who had replaced Galerius as Augustus of the East. Constantine shrewdly proposed an alliance, and offered his half-sister in marriage to Licinius, who accepted. Licinius assumed the marriage would consummate an equality between two caesars. Consistent with his new friendliness toward Christianity, Constantine proposed an end to the persecution of the Church, which he, like his father, had never carried out in any case. Licinius agreed. They met at Milan in 313 and jointly issued the Edict of Milan, granting universal re-

ligious freedom to pagans, Christians, and Jews. "Since we saw that freedom of worship ought not to be denied," the decree read, ". . . to each man's judgment and will the right should be given to care for sacred things according to each man's free choice."¹⁸

It is a moving, almost modern statement, but our assumptions are very different from what theirs would have been. Again, we think of the words "pagan," "Christian," and "Jew" as defining distinct groups, but the fluid interchange among them in that period of massive social mutation is striking. The potent movement toward monotheism among pagans is reflected in the fact that *Summus Deus* was by then a common Roman form of address to the deity.¹⁹ As seen in Constantine's originating piety, that supreme deity would have been associated with the sun,²⁰ and pagans would have recognized, with reason, their own solar cult in such Christian practices as orienting churches to the east, worshiping on "sun day," and celebrating the birth of the deity at the winter solstice.

That Christian piety commonly included pagan practice and superstition would have been part of the broad appeal of the Gospel among the least educated. Constantine's famously converted army, for example, was made up of unlettered peasants and barbarians, and it is unlikely they would have grasped essential matters of their new religion. Indeed, to the Teutons and Celts among them — and an army mustered from Trier would have drawn heavily from such tribes — the cross of Christ as the standard to march behind would have evoked the ancestral totem of the sacred tree far more powerfully than it would have Saint Paul's token of deliverance.²¹ Such an association may have figured in Constantine's instinctive grasp of the cross as a sign to rally to, since his army of barbarians, which grew with every conquest, was the first population he had to unify. Beginning with that army, a pragmatic tolerance, up to a point, would have been Constantine's *modus operandi*.

While Jews kept themselves apart from pagans, the line between Jews and Christians, even after two centuries, was still not hard and fast. That blurring was greater in some places than in others. We have seen, for example, that the large and influential community of Greek-speaking Jews in Alexandria — there were a million Jews in Egypt by the beginning of the second century²² — shared a Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, with the Church. The distinctive Christian act of worship was the Eucharist, but many Christians also observed the contemporary Jewish form of Psalm recital and readings, vestiges of which are preserved in the Christian Liturgy of the Word and in the Latin breviary. No doubt

some Christians and Jews during this time practiced this worship together. Symbols associated with early Christianity, like the fish, bread, and the cup representing wine, were Jewish cult symbols.²³ Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora would have had more in common with some Greek-speaking Christians like the Arians, whose strict monotheism made them suspicious of divinity claims for Jesus, than with the more inward-directed rabbis of Palestine. Some Jews of the Diaspora, to cite another example, did not insist on circumcision for Gentile converts,²⁴ which means that some Jews would not have seen Saint Paul's inflammatory position on this issue as the cause for rupture it is taken to be. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that some Jews in this period were religious in ways that, to the rabbis, would have been unrecognizable as Jewish.²⁵ And, one needn't assume that all Jews were religious in any sense. Finally, in that ultimate indicator we saw earlier, modern archaeology finds it difficult to distinguish between Jewish and Christian tombstones in many places, even into this fourth century.

But as a dominant culture begins to define itself more sharply, attendant subcultures inevitably do so as well. Blurred lines become anathema to all, and there is no doubt that the process of rectifying those lines had to begin, for Constantine, within the culture he was trying to make his own, which was the Church. Thus, while he was ordaining tolerance among religions, he was preparing to abolish tolerance within Christianity. In a letter written in 313, the year of the liberal Edict of Milan, he instructed his prefect in Africa to move against the Donatists, schismatic Christians who posited sanctity as a prerequisite for valid administration of the sacraments. "I consider it absolutely contrary to the divine law," he wrote, "that we should overlook such quarrels and contentions, whereby the Highest Divinity may perhaps be moved to wrath, not only against the human race, but also against me myself, to whose care He has, by His celestial will, committed the government of all earthly things, and that He may be so far moved as to take some untoward step. For I shall really and fully be able to feel secure and always to hope for prosperity and happiness from the ready kindness of the most mighty God, only when I see all venerating the most holy God in the proper cult of the catholic religion with harmonious brotherhood of worship."²⁶

Of course the "proper cult" of Catholicism was not yet clearly established, as the multiplicity of what would soon be termed heresies indicated. Once the impulse to establish a "harmonious brotherhood" within a group is reified, discordances from outside, originating with distinct

groups, become intolerable. The very fluidity of practice, belief, and membership between Jewish and Christian communities thus contributed to a first renegeing on the Milan Edict's promise of equality among the three religions.²⁷ In 315, Constantine issued the edict, referred to earlier, singling out Jews, making it illegal for them to proselytize. The decree signals the success Jews were having in attracting Christians to their cult and calendar. Moreover, the decree was prompted by a widespread Christian wish to maintain a lively connection with the Jewish origins of faith in Jesus. But the way the new law sought to protect the "harmonious brotherhood of worship" was to target Judaism, and not the "Judaizing" Christians. It therefore marked the decisive shift of weight in a balance that would now forever tilt against Jews.

The year 315 was decisive for Christian-pagan relations too. By then, Licinius, Augustus in the East, had realized that, despite similarities with the sun deity, the Christian God was different and would not readily take a place among the other gods of the Roman pantheon.²⁸ It may well have occurred to Licinius that he'd been had by Constantine, for whom tolerance was only the first step toward a new, Christian domination. Licinius saw, too late, that the Milan Edict itself gave a kind of primacy to Christianity: "Christian religion" was named first, and Roman paganism, like all paganism, was referred to as "any other cult."²⁹ The growing influence of Christianity would enhance Constantine's power and diminish his own. Seeing this, Licinius began to purge Christians from his civil service. The act gave Constantine the pretext he needed to declare war against yet another brother-in-law.³⁰

If there was then a certain religious fluidity among the peoples of the empire — a vagueness about attachments and beliefs that reflected the dispersion of political power — there was also a lack of religious clarity in Constantine's own mind. But as his gradual accumulation of political power seemed tied to his affiliation with the Christian God, he became firmer over time in that affiliation, beginning, in all likelihood, before the mythic conversion date of 312 and continuing even after his revealing letter of 313. His soldiers, going from victory to victory, would have redoubled their devotion to the charm of their Christian standard. That Constantine's full embrace of a Christian identity — and of martial sponsorship by the Christian deity — took place gradually, and not all at once as in the legend, is revealed by the fact that Sol, the pagan sun god, continued to be honored on Constantine's coins until 321. By such a relatively slow process do social mutations usually occur, even if after the fact they

are compressed, in the manner of boys' adventure stories, into moments of dramatic turnabout. What began, both in the empire and in Constantine's psyche, in the year 312 at Milvian Bridge did not reach completion until twelve years later.

In 324, at the Battle of Chrysopolis, on the eastern side of the Bosphorus, Constantine defeated Licinius, his last political rival. Constantine became the sole ruler of the empire. The ambition he had set for himself in the *Aula Palatina* in Trier was, in this patient, almost plodding way, achieved. And as all could see more clearly in 324 than they could have in 312, it was achieved under the sponsorship not of Sol Invictus, not of Apollo, but of Jesus Christ. It was not the result of mystical vision or supernatural intervention, for Constantine's pragmatic alliance with Christian groups in various contested locations was really what had proved decisive. Christians had faithfully rallied to him, and made the difference. And he could see that his allegiance to Christ would continue to be useful as he set out to consolidate his power over Asia Minor, the Levant, and Africa, which could only regard him as a foreign figure from the rough northwest. Christians made up a greater part of the Eastern empire than they did of the West, so Constantine's cross standard would be more rallied to now than ever.

What the effect of all this was on the ruler's inner state is impossible to say, but from this point on, all apparent ambiguities in his own religious identity dropped away. After Chrysopolis, Constantine was firmly and publicly Christian. He was, of course, instantly the most important Christian in the world, and in that time of social and religious ferment, he was in a position to put his own stamp on Christianity — and he did. That stamp inevitably reflected what he had just been through.

The Church in 324 had to remind Constantine of the empire he had inherited in 306 — a seething caldron of contention and rivalry, with doctrinal differences, even schisms, defined by regional loyalties. Bishops vied with each other for influence, and worshipers openly disagreed on the meaning of their worship. In addition to the Donatists, there were Docetists and Manichaeans and Arians with their cat's cradle of disputes about ways in which Jesus was man or God, and about the nature, substance, and personality of God. All of this must have seemed arcane to the soldier-monarch, appearing like religious versions of the tetrarchic factionalism he had set out from Trier to overcome. As a politician, Constantine had put his trust in the universalist spirit which, from above, appears as the humane bringing of order to chaos, while from below often

appearing as totalitarianism. His method was to tolerate diversity and share power for only as long as he had to. The unity of the empire — under himself — was to him the absolute political virtue. His string of successful conquests had confirmed its divinely ordained righteousness. So in turning to religion, unity of belief and practice, not tolerance of diversity, had to seem paramount.

If the young Constantine had felt chosen by the gods to unify the empire, the mature, Christian Constantine likewise assumed a divine mandate to unify the empire's religion. "We strive to the best of our ability to fill with good hope those who are uninitiated in such doctrines [as the Gospel of Jesus Christ]." This is Constantine speaking to an "assembly of saints," Christian leaders, about the year 320. "For it is no ordinary task to turn the minds of our subjects to piety if they happen to be virtuous, and to reform them if they are evil and unbelieving."³¹ Constantine fully understands himself by now as "the vice-regent of God,"³² and, as is clear from what he did as soon as he defeated Licinius, he did not hesitate to act as such, especially against the "evil and unbelieving."

Constantine moved at once against paganism. Pagans would continue to make up a majority of the empire until well after his death, and as his successors would learn, their resistance to Christian dominance would increasingly threaten an imperial power that defined itself as Christian. Once Constantine had cast his lot with the Christians, and once besieged pagans had looked to Licinius and his other enemies, Constantine knew that pagan submission would never mean loyalty. In some places he ordered pagan temples burned, as Diocletian had churches. He confiscated temple treasures and outlawed the showing of sacrificial smoke — a jettisoning of the tolerance of Milan. "Hence it was that, of those who had been slaves of superstition," Eusebius wrote of the pagans, "when they saw with their own eyes the exposure of their delusion and beheld the actual ruin of the temples and images in every place, some applied themselves to the saving doctrine of Christ; while others, though they declined to take this step, yet reprobated the folly they had received from their fathers, and laughed to scorn what they had so long been accustomed to regard as gods."³³

But Constantine knew the impossibility of forcing conversion on the pagan majority, and so, despite evidence of some such attacks, the main mark of his program was not violent persecution. That would come later in the century. Constantine wanted his pagan subjects to be won over as he himself had been — by seeing the benefit to the Roman world of a uni-

fying affiliation with the Christian deity. But how could they see that if Christians themselves were not unified? Christians could not even agree on how to calculate the date of Easter, much less on how Jesus was God.³⁴ Thus Constantine's political problem opened immediately into his religious one. That led to his — for our purposes — most fateful action yet. Immediately upon coming to power as the sole ruler of the empire, but only then, Constantine asserted the right to exercise absolute authority over the entire Church. He did this despite the fact that he was not baptized, and, as was not unusual, would not be until shortly before he died. The necessarily blurred lines of mystical feeling and spiritual paradox — what our contemporaries would call the religion of the analogical imagination, as opposed to the univocal or one-dimensional faith³⁵ — would be erased now in favor of clearly drawn boundaries of dogma. As regionalisms of a once divided empire had to be deleted — a common calendar had to be enforced — so with faith and its calendars. Constantine saw, in other words, that only a unified, sharply defined, and firmly advanced Christianity would overcome paganism.

Suddenly tolerance of theological disagreement and ecclesiastical particularities, which had been a given among Christians since Saints Paul and James had reached a *modus vivendi* at the Council of Jerusalem in the first century, was now deemed unchristian. Religious diversity fell under suspicion of being an overly relativized polytheism, a mark of the Pantheon, not the Church — although for two centuries Christian monotheism, like Jewish monotheism, had included a multiplicity of meanings and traditions. If that multiplicity became an unacceptable choice — “heresy” comes from the Greek word for “choice”³⁶ — it was more because of a political requirement than a religious one. The aim was *E pluribus unum*. *Pluribus* would be defined not as a principle of coequality but as the expendable means to the self-justifying end that is *unum*.

How is Jesus God? We saw that this question, *as question*, had been the essence of Christian conversation since his first followers had allowed themselves, in grief, first to pray to Jesus, then to speak aloud their tremendous intuition about him. But now an answer would replace the question in discourse. The single, definitive, univocal answer that had so far eluded the Christian consensus — eluded, that is, finely tuned, passionate minds as variously engaged with the question as Irenaeus, Origen, and Arius — would now be imposed by imperial fiat. Unity would henceforth be the note not only of the political order but of a revealed truth. With holiness and catholicity, “unity” would henceforth be, in the argot, a “mark” of the Church — at least in theory.

Differences in Christian belief and practice were often rooted, as in New Testament times, in the regional differences between, say, an Antioch in Syria or a Corinth in Greece, where Saint Paul composed his hymn to diversity.³⁷ Differences were natural in such a world, but now an emperor with a “celestial” mandate for “the government of all earthly things”³⁸ was determined to change that world. For Constantine, religious differences were impediments to the power that had replaced Maxentius and Licinius. In this way, the choice (“heresy”) to be religiously different became defined as treason, a political crime. But different from whom, and from what? For the first time in its history, the universal Christian Church was seen to need a defined orthodoxy, a word derived from the Greek for “right thinking.” This resulted from what might be called the first law of exclusion: You can’t say who is out unless you can say what it is to be in. “No heretic,” as the proverb has it, “without a text.”³⁹ It is important to emphasize that this need, which has so dominated Roman Catholicism that even now the Church cannot break free of it, was first defined not by the Lord, a Jew who identified with dissenters; nor by his apostles, who did not hesitate to differ from one another; nor by their successor bishops who defended regional interests; nor by evangelists who produced not one version of the Jesus story but four; nor by theologians who introduced innovative Hellenistic categories into Scripture study; nor by preachers who readily put their eccentric personal stamps on the kerygma — but by an all-conquering emperor for whom one empire had come to equal one religion.

Thus, the now absolute and sole Caesar, demonstrating an authority no one had ever exercised before, summoned the bishops of the Church to a meeting over which he himself would preside: “Wherefore I signify to you, my beloved brethren, that all of you promptly assemble at the said city, that is at Nicaea . . .”⁴⁰ Two hundred and fifty of them came.⁴¹ He would not let them leave until they had begun to do for the Church what he was doing for the empire. This meeting was the Council of Nicaea, the first Ecumenical Council of the Church. It took place in 325, only a year after Chrysopolis. In response to the emperor’s mandate, the bishops did, in fact, agree to a formulaic statement of belief, defining especially, and in explicit terms, how Jesus is God.⁴² They did so unanimously — well, almost unanimously. Those who dissented were exiled by Constantine. (More than one bishop — and most famously Athanasius, banished later — would serve out his exile in Trier.)⁴³ Christians still recite this formula today, as the Nicene Creed. As we stand solemnly at the midpoint of a Sunday liturgy, letting the familiar words roll off our tongues, we think of

the creed as a religious necessity, perhaps treasuring it as such, as I do. We give not a thought to its first function as a kind of loyalty oath, fulfilling a political necessity as much as a religious one.

But the creed we recite is not the same as the one the bishops approved, and the difference marks a turning point in our inquiry. "We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible . . ." ⁴⁴ For the first several verses, what the bishops approved and what we say are identical, including the key statement of how Jesus is God. To us, these phrases are an arcane litany, but to the Nicene prelates they were a precise confession, full of implication. "And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and on earth, who for the sake of us men and for the purpose of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead." ⁴⁵ The original Nicene statement goes on to issue a condemnation — "These the Catholic Church anathematizes" — of those who hold to the Arian position that the Son was somehow inferior to the Father, but that needn't concern us here. The point of comparison is with the phrase "becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day." Here is how an expanded Nicene Creed is recited in churches around the world today: ". . . and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day, he rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures."

In the original version of this pivotal profession of faith, not only is the death of Jesus not mentioned, neither is the crucifixion. In the second version, equal emphasis on incarnation, suffering, and Resurrection has been replaced by a strong emphasis on death, with the elaboration "suffered, died, and was buried." That strong emphasis is redoubled when the means of death — the only concrete, historical detail in the entire formulation — is given as "crucified under Pontius Pilate." Explicitly holding the Roman procurator responsible contrasts with Gospel accounts that emphasize his reluctance before Jewish bloodthirst, a change that may reflect the Church's new status in the empire as favored instead of persecuted, and that avoids self-accusation because, of course, Pilate was a pagan, and pagans have now joined the Jews as enemies *par excellence*. But the introduction of the phrase "in fulfillment of the Scriptures" makes a creedal af-

firmation of the supersessionist pattern of “prophecy historicized.” We have seen how easily the proclaiming of the story of Jesus as “fulfillment” opens into anti-Judaism. There is a hint of the anti-Jewish spirit of the Nicene fathers in their ban of the celebration of Easter in the same week as Passover.⁴⁶

The text of what we think of as the Nicene Creed evolved through a series of subsequent councils, more than a dozen of them,⁴⁷ culminating in the Council of Constantinople in 381. (That council is known for its definitive condemnation of Arianism.) Finally, the creedal statement, as reflected in the text we know, put the crucifixion at the center of faith and the death of Jesus at the heart of redemption.⁴⁸ That this is a mid-fourth-century innovation is emphatically revealed by the fact that the first Nicene formulation, in mentioning neither death nor crucifixion, had, in line with the constant tradition of the Church, left the emphasis on Incarnation and Resurrection. This change means that the Son of God became man not to be one of us, not to take on the human condition — which includes suffering but is not defined by it — and not, for that matter, to undergo the Resurrection, as the affirmation of the Father’s covenantal faithfulness to the Son. Instead, according to the theological shift reflected in the amended creed, the Son of God became man in order to be crucified. The crucifixion takes the place of the Resurrection as the saving event, and Christ the victim takes the place of Christ the victor as the symbol of God’s love for the world.

This shift has important implications for relations between Christians and Jews. With the cross at the center of a theology of salvation, it becomes the means of salvation. In this altered context, the Gospel slander that shifts chief responsibility for that cross from the Romans to the Jews — the creed’s indictment of Pilate notwithstanding — sets in motion a dynamic that will keep Jews at the heart of a quickened, and quickly armed, Christian hatred. “Tell me, do you praise the Jews for crucifying Christ,” Saint John Chrysostom will ask, around 387, “and for, even to this day, blaspheming Him and calling Him a lawbreaker?”⁴⁹ Chrysostom (c. 349–407), the bishop of Antioch, still revered as the patron saint of preachers, was the master of the sermon genre known as *Adversus Judaeos*. Such words inevitably led to actions: assaults on synagogues, the exclusion of Jews from holding public office, expulsions. Can it be a coincidence that attacks on Jews, both rhetorical and physical, become a notable pattern of Christian behavior only after the cult of the cross is established, not at Nicaea precisely, but in its aftermath?

How did this happen? Part of the answer may lie, remarkably enough, with a postprandial speech delivered by Constantine to the fathers of Nicaea at a banquet marking both the conclusion of the council and the twentieth anniversary of the emperor's accession to power. Here is how Eusebius sets the scene, "the circumstances of which were splendid beyond description": "Detachments of the body-guard and other troops surrounded the entrance of the palace with drawn swords, and through the midst of these the men of God proceeded without fear into the innermost of the imperial apartments, in which some were the emperor's own companions at table, while others reclined on couches arranged on either side. One might have thought that a picture of Christ's kingdom was thus shadowed forth, and a dream rather than reality."⁵⁰ Those present at this banquet would all have just signed the creed that made no mention yet of the cross — but the cross was at the heart of what Constantine had to say.

Eusebius, having just attended the council as bishop of Caesarea, was present at this event. His account of what Constantine said is the first clear telling of the story of the vision that the emperor only now, thirteen years after the fact, claims to have had on the eve of the Battle of Milvian Bridge. Various traditions had already cropped up that explained Constantine's conversion. One writer, Rufinius, had described an apparition that was aural, not visual, with Constantine hearing angels singing "By this conquer."⁵¹ Other accounts, as we saw, said the miraculous vision was of the Chi-Rho, a kind of divine monogram. But now, through Eusebius, we have Constantine's own description of what happened. I offer a fuller version now of what I cited in part earlier, to underscore the fact that this primal Christian myth of the cross has its origin not only in Constantine's own words but in his words spoken at Nicaea, meant to advance a political agenda.

The emperor said that about the noon hour, when the day was already beginning to wane, he saw with his own eyes in the sky above the sun a cross composed of light, and that there was attached to it an inscription saying, "By this conquer." At the sight, he said, astonishment seized him and all the troops who were accompanying him on the journey and were observers of the miracle.

He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep, the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had

seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.

At dawn of day, he arose, and communicated the marvel to his friends; and, then, calling together the workers in gold and precious stones, he sat in the midst of them, and described to them the figure of the sign he had seen, bidding them represent it in gold and precious stones. And this representation I myself have had an opportunity of seeing.⁵²

Eusebius then goes on to describe the making of the military standard, "the spear and transverse bar" we saw before.

What is going on here? This is mythmaking by the emperor himself. That the occasion for this first and only elaboration of that vision from years before, an explicit vision of the cross, was the Council of Nicaea tells us everything. It is at this moment, far more than in 312, that a unifying and universalizing symbol can serve the emperor's purpose. The cross, even apart from its association with the death of Jesus, is the perfect emblem of Constantine's program, with its joining of horizontal and vertical axes and with its evoking of the four directions: north, south, east, west. The cross of the compass unites the globe; a hand-held globe surmounted by a cross would be, with the crown and scepter, a symbol of the Christian king.

The public display of the cross as a religious symbol, especially as rendered in gold and jewels, would be a step away from the second-commandment prohibition of graven images. Indeed, a flowering of the Christian imagination would follow upon Constantine's innovation, with an elaborate iconography that would forever set Christianity apart from Judaism. But no creation of the Christian aesthetic would surpass the satisfactions of the cruciform image because of its subliminal but powerful evocation of the universal.⁵³ And it should be noted that, as Constantine was elevating the cross to the realm of the sacred, he was abolishing crucifixion as the Roman form of capital punishment. Soon enough, the memory of its true horrors would be smothered in pious stylization. Once unleashed, the impulse to raise the cross would lead not only to its hanging around necks and at the ends of strings of prayer beads, not only to placement on the walls of churches, but to the design of churches themselves, with the imperial basilica transformed into an apse by an intersecting transept. Christians would recognize the cross in the human body and in the tree, in the way light flares and in the conjunction of planets at the sun. Eventually they would see the cross, as I do, in telephone poles and in airplanes flying overhead.

The cross would become an object of adoration and a means of warding off evil. The thing itself would serve as a kind of primal sacrament. Even when Byzantine iconoclasts, years after Constantine, throw out the images of faith, they will make an exception of the cross,⁵⁴ the sign under which they, too, will seek to conquer. The letters IHS are ubiquitous in the Church — on vestments, altar cloths, baldachins, even impressed on the unleavened wafers of Holy Communion. The initials are the first three letters of the Greek word for Jesus, but after Constantine they also became understood as referring to his vision of the cross: *In Hoc Signo (Vinces)*. In my experience, that is the meaning most commonly attached to the monogram, a sign that the myth of Constantine's conversion remains firmly in Catholic memory. Once, however, kneeling beside my mother in St. Mary's Church, I asked her to explain the IHS above me, and she answered, "I Have Suffered."

It is not my purpose here to deny or establish the authenticity of Constantine's account, but only to observe that his choice of that first-ever council meeting at Nicaea as the place from which to promulgate his vision of the cross as a foundational myth of the church-state and state-church reveals a kind of imaginative genius. The cross and the creed *together* unified the Church. It seems at first only a nice coincidence, soldier that he was, that the cross so well lent itself to construction as a spear, but eventually that, too, would seem ordained. The appeal of the cross as a universalizing symbol would achieve its mobilizing critical mass as the emblem of the process begun at Nicaea only if the Christian sense of the cross's central place in the death of Jesus — and that death's central place in the redemptive plan of God — could be quickened. And for that, Constantine turned to his mother, Helena Augusta. Here enters the legend of the True Cross, which meant so much to my mother and me at Trier. Legend, yes, but the "discovery" is an event to which Constantine himself refers in a letter preserved by Eusebius.⁵⁵ The finding of the True Cross was a marvel Constantine rejoiced at and immediately publicized. What the emperor began with his speech to the bishops at Nicaea in 325, Helena carried forward with her pilgrimage to Jerusalem the following year.

The True Cross

JUST AS CONSTANTINE'S battle-eve vision of the cross at Milvian Bridge in 312 was not reliably recounted until 325, so the full story of Helena's "discovery" of the True Cross was first told only years later, by Saint Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, in the year 395.¹ As is true of the vision, so with the discovery: the context in which each story was first told lays bare its meaning. If the tide turned against the Jews in the first instance, it began to flood in on them in the second, as will become clear when we look at Ambrose's stance on the use of violence against Jews.

Eusebius, our source for Constantine's Nicaean telling of his vision, was, as we saw, the bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. In that role, he accompanied Helena on her pilgrimage, and he records the fact of that journey's having taken place.² Attributing a pious motive to her, Eusebius says that she wanted to pray on the very earth on which Jesus had walked. That is an impulse the power of which I know from my own experience. But Helena's journey to the East seems to have been as much an exercise in diplomacy as piety. After the Council of Nicaea, Constantine had returned to Rome, but the promulgation of the creed, unanimous or not, hardly settled the quarrels in the Church, with objections being raised especially in the East. "It would have been Helena's task on her 'pilgrimage' to help solve these problems," the scholar Jan Willem Drijvers has written. In his biography *Helena Augusta*, published in 1992, Drijvers provides an exhaustive history of the legend of the True Cross, and in what follows I rely on his account. "Helena's journey was not restricted to Palestine, but included in fact a visit to all the eastern provinces, as Eusebius himself states. She did not travel as a humble pilgrim but as an Augusta."³ Helena had become her son's regent — in effect the First Lady of the empire — only the year before, upon the death of Fausta, Constantine's wife, an event to

which we will return. In Drijvers's view, Helena made her dramatic journey to further Constantine's effort to Christianize pagans.⁴ Her related purpose was to help Christians overcome their reluctance to embrace his policy of unification of the Church.

Eusebius says that Helena visited the emperor's soldiers and distributed lavish bonuses to them. She presided over the release of prisoners and gave money from the imperial treasury to the poor. Everywhere she went, she presented the emperor's benevolent face, reinforcing a restive population's devotion to him. And not only that. Perhaps the most visible part of Constantine's Christianizing program was a hurried campaign to build large and resplendent churches everywhere, a strategy of demonstrating the triumph of Christianity over paganism. Constantine constructed the original of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, a deliberate reverencing of the site of the Fisherman's martyrdom. Helena, too, on her son's behalf, funded the construction of churches in the cities she visited. The climax of this effort was her association with the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.⁵

The construction of a lavish basilica shrine on the site of the tomb of Jesus had been undertaken by order of Constantine shortly after Nicaea. He wanted this church to be the most beautiful in the world, and there are records that Helena herself saw to its decoration. The tomb's location had been marked by a temple dedicated to Aphrodite, dating to the early second century when the Romans had renamed Jerusalem Aelia Capitolina. Across generations, the knowledge of the temple site's origin as the tomb of the Lord had been preserved. If anyone was going to look for the actual place of Golgotha, much less for remnants of the True Cross, they'd have begun where such an unbroken tradition pointed.

There are reasons to accept as historical the underlying fact of the legend of the True Cross — namely, that under Constantine, within a short time of Nicaea, something thenceforth revered as the cross on which Jesus died was discovered in Jerusalem. Constantine, writing to the bishop of Jerusalem in 326, refers to a "token of that holiest Passion" that had only recently been rescued from the earth, and he implicitly defined the basilica, to be known as the Martyrium, as a shrine to the True Cross.⁶ This is a geographical and physical extension of his placing the cross at the center of Christian symbolism at Milvian Bridge, and at the center of theology at Nicaea. As is reflected in the adjustments to the Nicene Creed in these years — "crucified . . . suffered, died, and was buried" — the idea of the centrality of the cross spread quickly.

Saint Cyril, a successor bishop of Jerusalem, writing in 351 to a successor emperor, Constantine's son Constantius II, connects the dots by tying the Milvian Bridge vision to the discovered True Cross in Jerusalem. "For if in the days of your imperial father, Constantine of blessed memory, the saving wood of the Cross was found in Jerusalem (divine grace granting the finding of the long hidden holy places to one who nobly aspired to sanctity), now, sire, in the reign of your most godly majesty, as if to mark how far your zeal excels your forebear's piety, not from the earth but from the skies marvels appear: the trophy of victory over death of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son of God, even the holy Cross, flashing and sparkling with brilliant light, has been seen at Jerusalem."⁷

According to such sources, there is no reason to accept as historical that Helena herself, despite her certain presence in Jerusalem in 326, had anything to do with the discovery of the True Cross, whatever is referred to by that phrase. When I first learned that, it came as a shock, because the story had been poured into the foundation of my faith — by, of course, my mother. I remember a scene in our yard at that house in Alexandria, Virginia. I might have been seven, the age I was when I met my neighbor Peter Seligman. It was springtime, and she was showing me the white blossom of our dogwood tree. Dogwood, she told me, was the state flower of Virginia. She loved our new tract house as much for the tree the contractor had spared as for anything. It had grown wild in the woods, was mature, but, in the way of dogwoods, was not large. It had a pleasing shape, and when in bloom it was a marvel of white.

"Look here," she said. I peered into the cup of the blossom cradled in her hand, and I followed her gesturing fingers as she touched the four petals, each with its tiny, heart-shaped purple stain. "This is the tree of the cross," she explained. "Once the dogwood blossom had been pure white, without these purple marks. Once the dogwood had been the tallest tree in the forest. But then the killers of Jesus used the wood of the dogwood to make the cross. The wood that Saint Helena found in Jerusalem was carved from a dogwood tree, and that helped her to recognize it as the True Cross, because by then, dogwood blossoms grew to make a cross themselves, showing the wounds of Christ with stains. By then the mighty dogwood no longer grew to be so tall." Our dogwood tree was not so small that its branches did not overhang the Seligmans' yard. I never told the story of the tree to Peter.

When a story falls into such blatant folktale rhythms, it is easy to dismiss it. Those who are inclined to discount the whole business of a found

crucifix have an ally in, of all people, Eusebius. As Helena's companion and chronicler, he is the reason to believe that her journey to Jerusalem in 326 was a historical event. No doubt that journey is the source of the legend connecting Helena to the True Cross, even if the connection is first made more than half a century later by Ambrose, who presents both the discovery and Helena's responsibility for it as factual. But in Eusebius's detailed account of Helena's progress through Palestine, there is no mention of the True Cross at all, which is a surprise, if only because the emperor himself referred to it ("token of that holiest Passion") in the same time frame.⁸ In describing Helena's sojourn, Eusebius is concerned just with the uncovering and celebrating of the ancient tomb of Jesus — the Holy Sepulcher, which to Eusebius is the site of the Resurrection. To him, the Resurrection is what counts. He has no interest in Golgotha, site of the crucifixion. As for the True Cross — like most Christians, he'd have regarded it as a token of shame, not an object to be sought out and revered. The Resurrection was the point.

Eusebius refers to the already begun construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and implies Helena's role of supporting her son's sweeping program of church-building throughout the East. Eusebius's account makes it seem that only one thing was going on here, when, as the design of the church itself indicates, a second strain of the Christian impulse was already being felt, and it had the weight of Constantine behind it. The architecture of the church complex makes the thing clear: The tomb of Jesus was marked by a relatively modest rotunda, called the Anastasis, while the newly uncovered, adjacent site of Golgotha was marked by a much larger basilica, the Martyrium. The basilica resembled, in fact, the audience hall of the palace Constantine had built for himself in Trier, a subtle reference to his origins. The tension apparent in the church-building foreshadowed the difference in emphasis between the Eastern and Latin Churches that continues to this day, the one elevating the victory of the Resurrection, the other elevating the agony of death.

There is, one should add, another reason besides theology that Eusebius would have chosen to ignore any report of a recovered True Cross in Jerusalem. As bishop of Caesarea, he was the primate of Palestine. That he was the region's dominant religious — and now political — figure is shown by his place at the side of Helena Augusta. Jerusalem, until then, was a backwater town from which Jews were still banished and in which Christians had expressed no interest. That was changing. The attention given to Jerusalem by the emperor and his mother had to alarm Eusebius.

A shrine containing relics of the True Cross, drawing pilgrims and power, could only undercut the prestige of Caesarea. In the event, with the legend of the True Cross taking hold, Caesarea did fade as the world importance of Jerusalem grew.⁹ It was an early lesson in the politics of relics, which would not be lost on, among others, the archbishops of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne.

Constantine traveled to Jerusalem in 335 to preside at the dedication of the completed Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher.¹⁰ It was one of the most magnificent churches in the world at the time. He would die two years later, and all would marvel at the new city he had created in Constantinople, but the goal he had set for himself in his first grand basilica, the *Aula Palatina* in Trier, was really achieved here, in his last one. Nothing symbolized the unity he had created more powerfully than the cross, and perhaps nothing had more pointedly enabled that unity than the cross. This was its shrine. The Martyrium would stand until 1009. The Anastasis, many times repaired, stands yet. It is what pilgrims revere today as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, but it is a pale shadow of what Constantine built.

His insistence on the cross, both symbolic and literal, sparked an immediate interest in relics of the True Cross. Fragments of wood appeared across Europe, supposedly from Jerusalem, to be venerated in churches and to be worn as talismans. A vestige of this obsession is preserved in our impulse to “knock on wood,” to ward off bad fortune. A piece of the True Cross is contained in the bronze cross atop the obelisk in St. Peter’s Square.¹¹ In the first manifestations of this cult, little attention was paid to the precise circumstances of the discovery of the True Cross, but soon enough — a familiar human pattern — a story began to evolve. Not surprisingly, it was a story featuring Helena. Hadn’t she been the one to shower benefactions on soldiers and common people? If Constantine had made himself a godlike figure, didn’t that make his mother like the mother who’d stood beside the cross of her divine Son? The cult of Helena would explode in the late fourth century around an elaborately imagined legend — or rather, set of legends¹² — that told of her devotion in tracking down not only the True Cross but its nails, the sign Pilate attached to it, various instruments used to torture Jesus, the thorns, the whip, and the Seamless Robe that Jesus wore, a relic to which we will return. How the bodies of the Magi fit into this is not clear, but Helena would also be credited with discovering the site of the Nativity cave in Bethlehem — relics from womb to tomb. Not incidentally, the potent narrative of this legend would assign a new, even more damning role of villainy to the Jews. And

the True Cross itself, a fine and final reversal, would justify the Jews' long-overdue punishment.

The one to give first and masterly expression to this legend was Saint Ambrose (339–397), the bishop of Milan. The son of a Roman official, Ambrose had made his first reputation, curiously enough, as the provincial governor of Trier. He was a cultured man, educated in the classics, who had been serving as an imperial governor when the people of Milan spontaneously chose him as their bishop — a signal of the century's volatile mix of religion and politics. Ambrose was a slight man but an eloquent preacher, and he soon became one of the most influential figures in the Church.

Some of the vivid impressions of Ambrose come from the writings of Augustine, whose conversion to the Church is often attributed to Ambrose. We find, for example, this description of Ambrose in *The Confessions*: "When he read, his eyes scanned the page and his heart explored the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. All could approach him freely and it was not usual for visitors to be announced, so that often, when we came to see him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud. We would sit there quietly, for no one had the heart to disturb him when he was so engrossed in study."¹³ From Ambrose, Augustine would learn what the contemplative act of reading enabled in the mind. It was to read without moving one's lips, an activity of the interior life entire.¹⁴ From Ambrose, Augustine would learn to see more than what was before the eyes. "I noticed, repeatedly, in the sermons of our bishop . . . that when God is thought of, our thoughts should dwell on no material reality whatsoever, nor in the case of the soul, which is the one thing in the universe nearest to God."¹⁵ Because of Ambrose, Augustine became convinced for the first time of the existence of a spiritual world, and by watching Ambrose, he found a way to enter it. "The story which Augustine tells in the *Confessions*," says his biographer Peter Brown of this relationship, ". . . is one of the most dramatic and massive evocations ever written of the evolution of a metaphysician; and his final 'conversion' to the idea of a purely spiritual reality, as held by sophisticated Christians in Milan, is a decisive and fateful step in the evolution of our ideas on spirit and matter."¹⁶

Despite present-day assumptions about the naiveté of a mind susceptible to mere legend, the sophistication of Ambrose is on full display in the use he makes of the story of Helena's discovery of the True Cross. He tells

it in the oration he preaches at the funeral of the emperor Theodosius, on February 25, 395, the oldest record of the legend. "The Spirit inspired her to search for the wood of the Cross," Ambrose declared. "She drew near to Golgotha and said: 'Behold the place of combat: where is thy victory? . . . Why did you labor to hide the wood, O Devil, except to be vanquished a second time? You were vanquished by Mary, who gave the Conqueror birth.'" ¹⁷

The victory includes the dawning of a Christian empire, but that has been delayed until now — delayed, according to Ambrose, by Satan's surviving agents, the Jews. Because of the discovery by Helena, Ambrose says, "The Church manifests joy, the Jew blushes. Not only does he blush, but he is tormented also, because he himself is the author of his own confusion." The reign of Constantine and the reappearance of the Cross, which indicts them, undoes the Jew, who confesses, "'We thought we had conquered, but we confess that we ourselves are conquered! Christ has risen again, and princes acknowledge that He has risen. He who is not seen lives again.'" ¹⁸ The Cross itself thus becomes a kind of second Incarnation, a salvific turning point by which the will of God is accomplished. Clever Jews knew the Cross had such power. They hid it over the centuries, not just because it was a proof that they had crucified the Lord, but because its revelation would bring about their final defeat. ¹⁹ One version of the Helena legend has a Jew being tortured until he agrees to show her where the Cross is buried. This story is poignantly rendered in the *Legend of the True Cross* fresco in Arezzo, by the fifteenth century's Piero della Francesca. The elaborate painting, in one panel entitled *Torment of the Hebrew*, shows a man with a rope around his neck being lowered into a well. Under such duress, he agrees to give up his people's last secret. When he does, Judaism's last hope is gone. ²⁰

Drijvers summarizes Ambrose's argument against the Jews this way: "They thought they had defeated Christianity by killing Christ, but through the finding of the Cross and the nails, as a result of which Christ and Christianity had come to life again, they themselves were defeated. Now, even the emperors recognize Christ and they have made themselves subservient to his power. Ambrose evidently presents Judaism as a force by its nature opposed to Christianity . . . [and] is undoubtedly of the opinion that the emperors should combat Judaism and that the Church and the secular authorities should consider the ruin of Judaism their common cause." ²¹

Thus the finding of the True Cross is the definitive victory over the

Jews, the end of a two-hundred-year-old sibling rivalry. An inch below the surface of piety, the discovery is a mythic sacralization of the momentous political event by which one of the siblings, for the first time, gained power over the other. Rivalry assumes a relative equality of force that would simply never exist again between Christians and Jews. So a shift here was inevitable, whether handled benignly or not. Alas, in this case, the newly empowered younger sibling, embodied in the *arriviste* Ambrose, reacted as if the very existence of the other were more a threat than ever.

Clearly, the uses to which Ambrose puts the legend of the True Cross mark a turning point in what will come to be known, in Jules Isaac's phrase, as the "teaching of contempt."²² Because promulgated by one of the greatest minds of the era, this contempt, now tied directly to the cross, will take hold as never before. For a time, it threatens to underwrite a version of what will come to be known as the Final Solution. And this all takes place in the name of Helena, the saint, the queen, the friend to nuns and priests, the patroness of armies, the benefactress of churches, the devoted mother of the emperor, and — through all of this — a model for my own. Helena, with Constantine, was seen to preside over a version of the Holy Family, the amity of which was a sacrament of the unity of the empire. In the name of that unity, the empire was to be a univocal totality now, whose mortal enemies within and without were at last to be defined and named. And once defined and named, targeted.

The sad truth is that Flavia Julia Helena Augusta was no such woman. The irony would be only poignant if so much violence did not hang on her legend. She began as a jilted wife — as we saw, her husband, Constantius, had turned her out of his household in favor of another woman. Only the coming to power of her son rescued her from bitter disappointment. She was brought back into the center of his family. But then, no sooner had they been put forward as the familial version of the concord Constantine wanted from Nicaea, these people turned on each other.

Before marrying Fausta in 307 (recall that she was the daughter of Maximian, Constantine's rival), Constantine had had a son by a concubine. That son's name was Crispus, and he had grown up to rule the northern empire as his father's regent, based in Trier. The family implosion that took place just as Constantine consolidated his power was probably some kind of dynastic intrigue, with Helena favoring Crispus, who lived in the Trier palace associated with her, on the site of the present ca-

thedral. As Constantine's wife, Fausta would have had good reason to oppose Crispus as Constantine's favorite, in favor of her own son. (Sibling rivalry now comes to seem a kind of cancer in the marrow of this story.) Some historians conjecture that Fausta hatched a plot to inspire Constantine's suspicions against Crispus.²³ All that is certain is that in 326, the year after the enforced love feast of the Council of Nicaea, Constantine ordered the murder of his firstborn son and the obliteration of the name Crispus from imperial history. That order may account for the destruction of Crispus's residence in Trier that year. The holy legend remembers this demolition as prompted by Helena's desire to replace her palace with the new cathedral built to enshrine the relic she brought to her hometown, which was the Seamless Robe of Jesus.

If Fausta did falsely conspire against Crispus, and if, after the murder, Constantine learned (from Helena?) that he had been misled by Fausta, that would account for what happened next. So would another, simpler explanation that some historians favor — namely, that Crispus and his stepmother Fausta were lovers.²⁴ What we do know is in that same fateful year, shortly after murdering his son, Constantine murdered his wife. It was then, and only then, that Helena assumed her sole place at her son's side, and it was then that she went out into the world to represent him — and the image of his family's unity. What could Helena's inner state have been when she made her pilgrimage to Jerusalem? Were her acts of charity, so celebrated by Eusebius, a kind of penance? Eusebius promoted only the happiest of images in all his accounts, and having designated Constantine as the new Moses, he makes no mention of the murders of his wife and son.

It was a ruthless time. We have already seen how, in his ascent, Constantine had not hesitated to dispatch a pair of rivals who were also his brothers-in-law. But a son! A father who slays a son! A father who slays his son in righteousness! It is impossible to consider the hidden tragedy of 326 apart from the glories of that year. Constantine's embrace of the ethos of the cross was already firm by then, but one needn't be a Freudian to sense the new power that the myth of the cross would have had over him. Evoking the binding of Isaac as it does, the story of the all-powerful father forced to put to death his beloved son — but for a redemptive purpose — must have obsessed the emperor at that moment. If God can kill his Son, so can God's coregent. Not that either need be left with a feeling of triumph. So, of course, the emotional appeal of the crucifixion would have outweighed the glories of the Resurrection. It was in 326 that Constantine

insisted on the construction of the greatest church in the world, the Martyrium, on the site of that “token of the holiest Passion,” which, against Eusebius, was decidedly not a token of new life but of death. And how could a father, after a year like that, have done otherwise?

In all of this, the family of Constantine was an authentic sacrament of the true state of the empire he had created — not in the holy concord of the legend but in its unleashed murderous violence. The irony was that the violence could be justified in the name of unity. After Constantine died in 337, his three surviving sons — Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius — were named by the Senate as coequal Augusti.²⁵ But they were immediately embroiled in a succession struggle that led to a blood-bath in Constantinople. At the end, apart from the three sons, only two males out of more than a dozen members of Constantine’s household were left alive. Soon enough, the sons set upon each other. Constantine II challenged Constans in 340, and was killed. Constans ruled in the West for a decade, to be murdered by a rival in his own army. Only about 353 did the third, Constantius, reestablish control over the whole empire.²⁶ For more than two decades after Constantine’s death, a kind of murderous internecine chaos reigned. There was ample precedent for such a turn in Roman history, but this went by the name of Christianity, with various rivals outdoing each other in claiming pious motives for political machinations.

The result? In 361, a member of the family who had been raised in this pathological culture of holy violence succeeded to the throne. His name was Julian. He was the son of a half-brother of Constantine’s who had been murdered by supporters of Constantine’s sons. Julian had been six at the time and barely survived the massacre. As emperor, he reigned for less than two years, but his impact on Christian attitudes, and on the arc of the Jewish-Christian narrative, was explosive. Julian tried to overturn the Constantinian revolution. He is remembered as the last pagan emperor, but it is important to note that he was raised a Christian — he is known as Julian the Apostate. Only after his army had saluted him as the new Augustus did he reveal that he had become a pagan, and that he intended to return the empire to paganism.²⁷ Given what he had seen in the household of Christianity, why not? But if his objection was to sacred violence, one would not know it from the ruthless campaign he immediately launched against Christian churches. “The Church again had martyrs,” T. D. Barnes comments.²⁸

Julian was a well-educated man, schooled in Athens. To him, paganism was not, as to us, a matter of taking cues from the entrails of pigeons, but a

matter more of the wisdom of Socrates. He had a genius for sensing the Church's weak point — and wasn't that the Jews? Since the entire inverted pyramid of Christian belief had come to rest on the point of "prophecy historicized," Julian understood that if he could demonstrate that the Christian claim to have replaced Judaism as the "true Israel" was false, he could undermine the Christian religion. That is, if he could show that the "fulfillment" of ancient Hebrew prophecy, on which the Church based every claim it made for Jesus Christ, was illusory, the Christian God would fail. How to do such a thing?

In the beginning of this story lies the answer, and it is the Temple in Jerusalem, which is why the end of the story — John Paul II reverencing the Western Wall — is so compelling. So much had come to rest on the initiating moment described in Luke: "And as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, 'As for these things which you see, the days will come when there shall not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.'"²⁹ And hadn't just such a thing come to pass? The Temple's destruction in 70 and again in 135 was concrete proof that God had withdrawn his favor from the old religion to bestow it on the new. "Destroy this Temple," Jesus was remembered as having said, referring to himself. That he was the new Temple was proven when the old was destroyed.

So Julian, right after declaring the end of the Christian empire, ordered the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem rebuilt, stone upon stone, to falsify the very words of Jesus. He ordered the city opened to Jews again, and he empowered Jews to govern it. All of this was a measure less of Julian's affection for Judaism than of his hatred for Christianity. And one can imagine how a Christianity newly enamored of the "Holy City" and of its own Temple, the Holy Sepulcher, took this reversal. The meaning of the survival of the Jewish people as rejecters of Jesus Christ had never been more powerfully on display. The whole Roman world would have understood what was at stake in the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple.

Jews, naturally, were overjoyed. Their long suffering was finally vindicated, and their restoration seemed at hand. They began to work on the reconstruction of the ruined Temple at once. To this day, Jerusalem's tourist guides point to the course of mammoth blocks they added to the Temple Mount, at the Western Wall. To place one stone upon another was a long-overdue rebuttal to the false Messiah.³⁰

"The Church again had martyrs," Barnes wrote, but he added, "and again had vengeance from on high: Julian died during an invasion of Per-

sia which had failed.”³¹ Not only that. The Jews at work on new excavations for the Temple had touched off explosions in gaseous deposits, which Christians saw as the mighty and miraculous intervention of God.³² There were even reports that the explosions were accompanied by the appearance of the cross in the sky.³³ “So ended the last attempt to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem, from then to now,” Jacob Neusner comments. “Julian’s successors dismantled all of his programs and restored the privileges the Church had lost. We need hardly speculate on the profound disappointment that overtook the Jews of the empire and beyond. The seemingly trivial incident — a failed project of restoring a building — proved profoundly consequential for Judaic and Christian thinkers. We know that a quarter of a century later, John Chrysostom dwelt on the matter of the destruction of the Temple — and the Jews’ failure to rebuild it — as proof of the divinity of Jesus.”³⁴

Proof! Proof! But never enough. After the near reversal of Julian, Christians reacted with an unprecedented vengeance, both emperors and bishops, against both pagans and Jews. Such reaction was undoubtedly caused by fear and insecurity. It was only after Julian, through the successive reigns of the emperors Valentinian and Theodosius, that the empire came to be formally proclaimed Christian; only then that Christian heresy was pronounced a capital crime; only then that pagan worship was officially banned; only then that the authority of the Jewish patriarchate was abolished forever. And it was then that the question of what to do about the Jews who refused either to yield or to disappear surfaced in the official discourse of secular and religious authorities. From one side, it seemed simple. Once church and state had agreed that it was righteous and legal to execute those Christians — Docetists, Donatists, Nestorians, Arians — who dissented from defined dogma on relatively arcane matters of theology, why in the world should stiff-necked persons who openly rejected the entire Christian proclamation be permitted to live?

Here is the relevance of the explicitly anti-Jewish use to which Saint Ambrose of Milan finally put the legend of the True Cross. He recounted it as a historical sequence of events — as it would be recounted from then on, down to the time my mother told the story to me — complete with the supposedly factual detail that it was a Jew who led Helena to the long-buried crucifix. The Jew who betrayed Jesus — by this time, Judas Iscariot was remembered as the Jew among the Christian apostles — now betrayed his own people. In Ambrose’s hands, sweet Helena became the mother of real Jew hatred, and she was the canonizer of his now open campaign to wipe

out Judaism. In 388, a Christian mob, led by the bishop in Callinicus, a small city on the Euphrates, attacked and burned a synagogue, destroying it utterly. They also destroyed the chapel of a Gnostic sect, despite the fact that its leaders had just agreed, under pressure from the emperor Theodosius, to accept Nicene Christianity. So Theodosius ordered the Christians of Callinicus to rebuild the Gnostic chapel and the synagogue. This is the emperor whom Hugh Trevor-Roper called "the first of the Spanish Inquisitors."³⁵ His command to rebuild the places of worship was a matter not of religious freedom but of imperial authority. Still, the action in defense of a Jewish community prompted an immediate and ferocious response from none other than Ambrose. In a direct written challenge to Theodosius — at whose funeral most of a decade later he would recount the Helena legend — the bishop of Milan declared himself ready to burn synagogues "that there might not be a place where Christ is denied." A synagogue, he said, is "a haunt of infidels, a home of the impious, a hiding place of madmen, under the damnation of God Himself."³⁶ To order the rebuilding of such a place, once it had been burned, was an act of treason to the Faith.

Theodosius yielded, but insisted that the Christians of Callinicus had to restore the sacred articles of worship they had plundered. He would rebuild the synagogue himself. Ambrose rejected this, too. The principle had to be established that the destruction of the "vile perfidy" of Jewish worship was a righteous act, in no way to be punished. Ambrose challenged the emperor to his face, during Mass at the cathedral of Milan. Rosemary Radford Ruether describes the scene: "Coming down from the altar to face him, the bishop declared that he would not continue with the Eucharist until the emperor obeyed. The emperor bowed to this threat of excommunication, and the rioters at Callinicum went unadmonished."³⁷

Augustine Trembling

THE PREVIOUS EASTER, in 387,¹ this same Ambrose had taken a thirty-three-year-old man naked into a pool of water, and three times, pushing by the shoulders, he had forced the man under, saying, "I baptize you, Augustine." After Constantine, the conversion of Augustine (354–430) may be the most momentous in the history of the Church. He was born seventeen years after Constantine died. He was a bishop in Hippo, a small city in North Africa, but it is as a writer that he is remembered. He wrote nearly a hundred books, by his count, and thousands of letters and sermons, most of which survive. Garry Wills describes his method: "Augustine dictated to relays of stenographers, often late into the night . . . He employed teams of copyists. His sermons, several a week, were taken down by his own or others' shorthand writers. In some seasons, he preached daily. His letters were sent off in many copies. He paced about as he dictated, a reflection of the mental restlessness and energy conveyed in the very rhythm of his prose."² His greatest work, to which we will turn, may be *The City of God*, a meditation on the relationship of the Church and the empire, of politics and virtue, of history and hope. But his most compelling work is surely *The Confessions*,³ the Western world's first great autobiography. This book, with its realistic exploration of human psychology and its affirmation that subjective experience is of ultimate value, stamped the mind of Europe. Its search for God in an act of memory makes each person a center of Christian revelation. That idea is the birthplace of modern individualism, for good and for ill.

Augustine's solid grounding in the classical intellectual tradition prepared him for the task of applying categories of Platonic thought to Christian theology. To take only one example of the importance of his ideas, he marshaled the definitive argument against the Donatists, who held that saintly virtue was a prerequisite for full membership in the Church. Augustine's position was rooted in Plato's distinction between

the ideal and the real, and Augustine knew that the ideal would not be realized until God brought about the fulfillment of Creation at the end of time. Therefore, he held, the human condition was by definition flawed. Gospel was addressed to human beings, not to angels. Because Augustine carried the day against the Donatists, Christians could come together before God, confessing sin, and knowing that the Church itself, too, remained imperfect. The Church would not be a sect of the saved but a community open to all. Augustine is commonly credited as the father of Western Christian theology, but he is, perhaps more basically, the father of the inclusive Western Church we know, in both its Catholic and Protestant manifestations.

Augustine took his baptismal instructions from the great Ambrose.⁴ For our purposes, it is worth noting that the mediating link between Augustine and Ambrose was Augustine's mother, Monica. She was a devout Christian, but the young, unchurched Augustine had fled her, leaving her standing "wild with grief"⁵ on the pier in Carthage. But she followed him to Milan. There, while he continued his preconversion life as a pagan, she became a devoted follower of Ambrose. When the bishop was physically besieged by barbarian Arians in his basilica in 386, for example, Monica was with him, sharing the mortal danger.⁶ She formed the habit of ending each day by chanting hymns that Ambrose had composed. The pattern of such devotion, especially focused on a prelate — in my mother's case, it was Cardinal Spellman — is familiar to sons who follow their mothers into piety.

The Confessions tells a mammoth story, but a central theme is Augustine's flight from his mother. Like Helena, she was a disappointed wife of a withholding husband, and she turned the laser of her need on her son.⁷ Her love seemed overbearing and suffocating until — well, until it seemed like love. "Not long before the day on which she was to leave this life — you knew which day it was to be, O Lord, but we did not — my mother and I were alone, leaning from a window which overlooked the garden in the courtyard of the house where we were staying at Ostia. . . . We were talking alone together and our conversation was serene and joyful."⁸ Monica died in 387, not long after her son's baptism. Garry Wills takes the view that "too much is often made of her role in Augustine's life,"⁹ but Augustine's own testimony is poignant: "I closed her eyes, and a great wave of sorrow surged into my heart."¹⁰

In the enclosed garden of his consciousness, Augustine watched as what his mother had planted in him came to flower. "Words cannot describe how dearly she loved me," he writes in *The Confessions*, "or how much

greater was the anxiety she suffered for my spiritual birth than the physical pain she had endured in bringing me into the world.”¹¹

“You were there, before my eyes,” he says to God (and, one infers, to Monica). “But I had deserted even my own self. I could not find myself, much less find you.”¹² When he found God, he put into a new kind of language what the experience of God could be for human beings. In his milestone work of theology, *The Trinity*, Augustine detects the very structure of God’s inner life in the dynamics of human consciousness and human relationships — an approach that could have rescued Christian theology from the dead-end disputes that had racked the Church for much of the previous century, when Christians went to war over definitions of words like “essence,” “substance,” and “person” as applied to God. “The reader of these reflections of mine on the Trinity should bear in mind,” he begins, “that my pen is on the watch against the sophistries of those who scorn the starting-point of faith, and allow themselves to be deceived through an unseasonable and misguided love of reason.”¹³ The point for Augustine was that whatever the *aspects* of the Godhead (or, as a Jewish sage might have put it, such *activities* of the Godhead as Word or Spirit) are to each other, they are in *relation* to each other. *Relationship* is the ground of divine being, an idea that opens up monotheism by moving the meaning of God’s oneness away from “unit” and toward “unity.” This tempering of the constant human temptation toward exclusivism could reasonably be expected to have tempered the universalist totalitarianism gripping the empire and the Church by then. *The Trinity* is a celebration of love as the basis of Christianity. As such, it may not be too much to detect its source in the love Augustine had experienced from and for Monica, the full range of which was revealed to him only in the writing of *The Confessions*, which he completed in c. 397. He completed *The Trinity* in c. 410, but in that same year Alaric’s Gothic hordes sacked Rome. “When the brightest light was extinguished,” said Saint Jerome of that event, “when the whole world perished in one city, then I was dumb with silence.”¹⁴ The culture-wide trauma of the Germanic tribes’ arrival in Rome marked a turning point in Augustine’s life and attitudes.

I referred to Augustine’s assertion of the idea that the human condition implies a perennial state of finitude, weakness, and sin, all of which will be overcome, even for the Church, only with the end of time. Augustine’s theology of original sin and the Fall has influenced all subsequent generations of Western Christians, none more so than Luther and Calvin in the Reformation era. Augustine is thus regarded as the father of a severe, flesh-hating, sin-obsessed theology, but that dark characterization misses

the point of his insight. His honest admission of the universality of human woundedness is a precondition for both self-acceptance and forgiveness of the other, which for Augustine always involved the operation of grace, God's gift. Only humans capable of confronting the moral tragedy of existence, matched to God's offer of a repairing grace, are capable of community, and community is the antidote to human woundedness. Augustine sensed that *relationship* as being at the heart of God, and he saw it as being at the heart of human hope, too. This is a profoundly humane vision.

But hope faded. As was true of many of his contemporaries, Augustine's spirit was gradually weighed down as Alaric's armies began an inexorable movement east and south from Rome, while Attila's Huns took over the north, all the way to the Rhine. These invasions signaled what was even then taken to be the beginning of the end of the empire. With the coming invasions of the Vandals, clouds darkened Augustine's essentially positive outlook, marking his late writings with apprehension and unrest. By then Augustine was a man waiting for the end of the world, with reason. The Vandals destroyed the Roman order in North Africa in the summer of 429, wiping out all that Augustine had built and loved. Not long after his death in 430, they would overrun his city of Hippo.

Scholars draw a contrast between the early and late Augustine, between the life affirmer and the naysayer. It was the late Augustine who, no longer depending on the force of reason, justified the use of coercion in defending, and spreading, the orthodox faith: "For many have found advantage (as we have proved, and are daily proving by actual experiment)," he wrote in a treatise ominously entitled *The Correction of the Donatists*, "in being first compelled by fear or pain, so that they might afterwards be influenced by teaching."¹⁵ He supported the passage of laws against pagans and heretics, and he offered a theological justification for a policy of *correctio*. He could not advocate the extension of such fierce evangelizing without a qualm, but finally he did. And now the fierceness was armed. "What shall I say as to the infliction and remission of punishment in cases in which we only desire to forward the spiritual welfare of those we are deciding whether or not to punish? . . . What trembling we feel in these things, my brother Paulinus, O holy man of God!" This is from a letter Augustine wrote to Paulinus of Nola around the time of Alaric's invasion of Italy. "What trembling! What a darkness! May we not think that with reference to these things it was said, 'Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me. And I said, O that I had wings like a dove, for then I should fly away and be at rest.'"¹⁶

But the time when Augustine could flee was past. As a bishop now, he too had to make the hard decisions, in this brutal age, attendant on the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He had taken his place with those prepared to use violence in stamping out heresy; indeed, he gave them their theological rationale. In *The City of God*, his last great work, written to rebut the charge that the empire's embrace of Christianity had led to the collapse implied by Vandal victories, Augustine firmly justified the harsh, even totalitarian policies of the Christian rulers. If anything, they had not been harsh enough. Now, for Augustine, the world was divided between those who lived in the flesh of the City of Man and those who lived in the spirit of the City of God. The latter could look forward to heaven, the former to hell, and if hell began for them on earth, so be it. The dualistic Manichaeism of Augustine's youth reasserted itself with a vengeance. The basic theme of *The City of God*, as Peter Brown puts it, is "that the disasters of the Roman Empire had come not from neglect of the old rites, but from tolerating paganism, heresy and immorality in the new Christian empire."¹⁷

Augustine's was a tragic vision, for it was authentically grounded — despite the shivers caused in us by his *correctio* — in the idea of God as love. The offer of that love, even to inhabitants of the City of Man, was permanent. If that was so, then violence could have no sacred significance, because it did not represent any attitude or action of the loving God. The City of God is based on love; the City of Man is based on war. Violence, Augustine felt, was not built into the nature of things, and so was not inevitable. Furthermore, while never to be seen as sacred, violence in defense of an endangered neighbor could be an act of love.

Despite the unbridled ruthlessness of his age, Augustine, building on the religious argument of the Hebrew Scriptures, initiated history's first political argument against war, an argument that has come down to us as his widely misunderstood theory of the just war. Instead of being a rationale for state-sponsored violence, as its critics are wont to say today, the theory is a rather desperate effort to curtail it, to hem war-making in, that is, by stringent conditions. The idea of the just war, the introduction of limiting principles, and a notion of war as always involving evil, even if a lesser evil, were profoundly humanizing innovations.

The tragic purity of Augustine's intentions — tragic because all too pure — was fully on display when he turned to the question of the Jews. Rampant violence, sanctioned by the Church and the state, was ubiquitous.

Jews were increasingly targeted, ominously so, because of all misfit groups they still posed to univocal Christianity the most mortal threat. In the year of Augustine's baptism — the year of his mother's death — Saint John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch, had delivered a series of sermons that ratcheted up homiletic attacks on Jews. Ruether calls them "easily the most violent and tasteless of the anti-Judaic literature of the period."¹⁸

It is of secondary importance that Chrysostom's real targets were those Christians — "Judaizers" — who were drawn to Jewish cult and practice, because his assault carried beyond them to Jews as such. "I know that many people hold a high regard for the Jew, and consider their way of life worthy of respect at the present time. This is why I am hurrying to pull up this fatal notion by the roots . . . A place where a whore stands on display is a whorehouse. What is more, the synagogue is not only a whorehouse and a theater; it is also a den of thieves and a haunt of wild animals . . . No better disposed than pigs or goats, [the Jews] live by the rule of debauchery and inordinate gluttony. Only one thing they understand: to gorge themselves and to get drunk."¹⁹ Ruether points out that nowhere in his sermons does Chrysostom directly order attacks on Jews, but did he need to? He said, "When animals have been fattened by having all they want to eat, they get stubborn and hard to manage . . . When animals are unfit for work, they are marked for slaughter, and this is the very thing which the Jews have experienced. By making themselves unfit for work, they have become ready for slaughter. This is why Christ said, 'As for my enemies, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me.'"²⁰

Should we be surprised that not long after these sermons were preached, there were several violent outbursts against Jews in Antioch, with its great synagogue demolished? Antioch is the site, in this period, of a first draft of the "ritual murder" charge brought against Jews.²¹ Shall Jews be allowed to live as Jews? Increasingly, momentum built toward a new consensus: No. In 414, what might be termed history's first large-scale pogrom occurred, that savage assault, referred to earlier, on the large, ancient, and prestigious Jewish community in Alexandria. A historian of the time says the Jewish settlement there was destroyed.²²

The abolition of the Jewish patriarchate in Palestine, tied as it was to the rediscovery by Christians of the Holy Land, emphasizes, like the fate of the community in Alexandria, that Jews living alongside Christians would from now on be at particular risk. One result of this would be the further flourishing of the rabbinic centers in relatively remote Babylonia, under

Persian dominance, where a so-called exilarch was recognized as the head of the Jewish people. Jewish academies in Persia, building on the Mishnah, would bring to full flower Jewish literary and spiritual impulses in the masterly Babylonian Talmud. Here is an important difference between Jewish and Christian development: Jewish study of Torah and commentary, conducted at a remove from Christianity, led to a more or less independent self-understanding.

Beginning in this period, Jews stopped acting like sibling rivals in a contest over a shared legacy and began to see their own legacy as having nothing to do with the developing theology or opinions of Christians. Jewish sages, commenting on the commentaries, interpreting the interpretations, had entered an entirely new room of the religious imagination. The discourse of rabbis became multilayered. They derived meaning as much from the nuances of text as from its obvious significance. Exegesis became a way of recovering the past, and Midrash, from the Hebrew word for "interpretation," became a way of infusing the present with awe. The elusiveness of God came to be reflected in the circumspection of the esoteric elucidation of God's Word. "In the Jewish tradition," Moshe Halbertal comments, "the centrality of the text takes the place of theological consistency. Jews have had diverse and sometimes opposing ideas about God: the anthropomorphic God of the Midrash, the Aristotelian unmoved mover of Maimonides and his school, the Kabbalah's image of God as a dynamic organism manifested in the complexity of his varied aspects, the *sefirot*. These conceptions of God have little in common and they are specifically Jewish only insofar as each is a genuine interpretation of Jewish canonical texts."²³ Israel, as the critic Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi put it, "was transfigured into texts-in-exile," and the "literacy of exile" would give shape to the Jewish religious imagination.²⁴

The rabbinic method itself, in other words, was seen as a worshipful embodiment of the holy. Much of this was spoken in instruction, meditation, and prayer, as masters trained disciples, but nearly always there were disciples taking careful notes of what was said, and then editors compiling new texts, which themselves served as the touchstone of contemplation and, more prosaically, as instruction manuals in Jewish spirituality. Among this most literate people, an oral tradition quickly became a living sacred literature. At the heart of this enterprise, of course, remained the Pentateuch of Moses — the Torah. Mishnah, and ultimately Talmud, built a kind of moat around the Torah, as the study centers themselves served as a bulwark of the Jewish people.

But Jews in the crumbling Roman Empire remained at risk because

their very presence challenged the integrity of both a transformed Church membership and a radically new Christian self-understanding to which Jews remained important. Augustine's treatment of the question must be seen against this backdrop. Among Church fathers, Augustine is remarkable for his sensitivity to the Jewish character of Christian faith, which derived from his close reading of Paul. Augustine was far less polemical in his reading of the Old Testament than other Christian thinkers. "Augustine forbears derogatory comparison," Paula Fredriksen has written. "If the Old Testament is a concealed form of the New and vice versa, then each is alike in dignity and religious value." Fredriksen also makes the point that Augustine argued "against Jerome that both Jesus and the first generation of Jewish apostles, Paul emphatically included, were, as Christians, also Torah-observant Jews."²⁵

But Augustine's writing about Jews of his own time, especially his treatise in the *Adversus Judaeos* genre and in book 4 of *The City of God*, both of which date to about the year 425, is marked by a typical expression of Christian contempt. In one place, denouncing them for their rejection of the "obvious testimonies" of the prophets, he declares Jews to be "the House of Israel which [God] has cast off . . . They, however, whom He cast off . . . are themselves the builders of destruction and rejecters of the corner-stone."²⁶ In another, he asserts that "the Lord Christ distinguished between His faithful ones and His Jewish enemies, as between light and darkness." Jews were "those on whose closed eyes He shed His light."²⁷

Augustine calls on Jews to repent and come into the Church. But if they refuse? The danger to Jews was that, in a brutal age in which the Church was finally in a dominant position, key Christian thinkers were openly concluding that the Jews' continued existence could no longer be justified. Whether out of an essential humanitarianism or not — and one would like to think he came to his position as a result of a firm attachment to God as a God of love — Augustine met that argument head-on, and rejected it. That is, he rejected not only Chrysostom but his mentor, Ambrose. Against those arguing that Jews were the enemies of Jesus, Augustine would insist, in effect, on considering the question in the light of Jesus' own Jewishness. And even if such enmity was to be established, he could ask, Where in Jesus does one find an execution order?

Ruether writes, "The difference between the treatise of Augustine and the sermons of John Chrysostom does not lie in any difference of basic doctrines about the status of the Jews, but in the fact that Augustine writes in the detachment of his study with no Jewish threat in sight, while Chrysostom speaks in the heat of battle."²⁸ But is that so? Nothing in

Chrysostom wants the survival of Jews as Jews, while in Augustine that very thing comes to be seen as “part of the providence of our true God.”²⁹ At a crucial moment, writing at the height of his prestige, Augustine offers a new rationale for a limited Christian version of the long tradition of Roman tolerance of Judaism. This lengthy passage, a whole chapter in *The City of God*, summarizes the history of Jewish-Christian conflict. It includes a description of how this prophecy-fulfillment dynamic condemns the Jews and, in Augustine’s momentous innovation, how that same dynamic requires, in a murderous age, that Jews be spared:

When Herod was on the throne of Judea, and when Caesar Augustus was emperor, after a change in the Roman constitution, and when the emperor’s rule had established a world-wide peace, Christ was born, in accordance with a prophecy of earlier times, in Bethlehem of Judah (Micha 5:2). He was shown in outward appearance as a human being, from a human virgin; in hidden reality he was God, from God the Father. For this is what the prophet foretold: “See, a virgin will conceive in her womb and will bear a son, and they will call his name Emmanuel, which is translated, ‘God with us’” (Isaiah 7:14). Then, in order to make known the god-head in his person, he did many miracles, of which the gospel Scriptures contain as many as seemed enough to proclaim his divinity. The first of these is the great miracle of his birth; the last, his ascension into heaven with his body which had been brought to life again from the dead. But the Jews who killed him and refused to believe in him, to believe that he had to die and rise again, suffered a more wretched devastation at the hands of the Romans, and were utterly uprooted from their kingdom, where they had already been under the dominion of foreigners. They were dispersed all over the world — for indeed there is no part of the earth where they are not to be found — and thus by evidence of their own Scriptures they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ. In fact, very many of the Jews, thinking over those prophecies both before his passion and more particularly after his resurrection, have come to believe in him. About them this prediction was made: “Even if the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is only a remnant that will be saved” (Isaiah 10:20). But the rest of them were blinded; and of them it was predicted: “Let their own table prove a snare in their presence, and a retribution and a stumbling block. Let their eyes be darkened, so that they may not see. Bend down their backs always” (Psalm 69:22). It follows that when Jews do not believe in our Scriptures, their own Scriptures are fulfilled in them, while they read them with blind eyes. Unless, perhaps, someone is going to say that the Christians fabricated the prophecies of Christ which are published under the name of Sibyl, or any prophecies that there may be which are ascribed to others, which have no

connection with the Jewish people. As for us, we find those prophecies sufficient which are produced from the books of our opponents; for we recognize that it is in order to give this testimony, which, in spite of themselves, they supply for our benefit by their possession and preservation of those books, that they themselves are dispersed among all nations, in whatever direction the Christian Church spreads.

In fact, there is a prophecy given before the event on this very point in the book of Psalms, which they also read. It comes in this passage, "As for my God, his mercy will go before me; my God has shown me this in the case of my enemies. Do not slay them, lest at some time they forget your Law," without adding, "Scatter them." For if they lived with that testimony of the Scriptures only in their own land, and not everywhere, the obvious result would be that the Church, which is everywhere, would not have them available among all nations as witnesses to the prophecies which were given beforehand concerning Christ.³⁰

The impact of this passage on those who read *The City of God* boiled down to that admonition ingeniously culled from the Psalms: Do not slay them! Augustine made it seem like the very voice of God. This was a direct contradiction of the imperative — Slay them before me! — that Chrysostom attributed to a brutal Christ. Subsequent history resounds with the cry of Augustine here: Do not slay them!

Why not? Because the Jews (unlike pagans, unlike Christian heretics) still had a role in the salvific plan of God. They were to be "as witnesses to the prophecies which were given beforehand concerning Christ." Fredriksen argues that Augustine saw Jewish devotion to the Law as a kind of sacrament, and because it was out of that devotion that Jews rejected Jesus, their "continuing 'fleshly' allegiance to their Law made Israel, even after the establishment of the church, uniquely witness to Christ. Thus God himself protects them from the duress of religious coercion."³¹

But the excerpt just given, perhaps reflecting the darkness of the later Augustine, nevertheless points to the precarious position in which Jews now found themselves. The irony in this passage is heartbreaking, as the entire misbegotten pattern of the Jewish-Christian disconnect is recapitulated. Those first, grief-struck followers of Jesus had created a narrative of his Passion and death in part out of reports of what had happened, but more out of the consoling Scriptures of their Jewish religion. All too soon, that creative narration had come to be understood as "history remembered" instead of "prophecy historicized." Later Christians, especially those not Jewish, could only misread the details of the narrative that had been gleaned from the Psalms and the Prophets as referring to things

that had actually happened. Then, in generation after generation, such “fulfilled prophecies” were used against the Jews as “proofs.” Augustine, as we saw, was disinclined to a polemical pairing of Old and New Testaments, and he saw the tradition of Jewish Law observance as a positive witness to Christ, yet here the meaning of Judaism was reduced to Jews’ “witnessing . . . in spite of themselves” to those selfsame prophecies. A continuing Judaism would serve as a source of authentication for the prophecy-based claims of Christianity. As long as Jews existed, with their ancient texts, the ancient — and therefore noble — character of Christianity was apparent, because those texts “foretold” Christ. The dispersion of Jews helps with this, and so it is God’s will — Scatter them! — that they be allowed to live as exiles everywhere. By this schema, they would be allowed to be at home, “at their own table,” nowhere.

As this tradition took hold in the minds of Christians, it brought along what Fredriksen calls a “trail of pseudo-Augustinian anti-Jewish writings that grew in its wake.”³² It was not only the Diaspora that provided Jewish witness to the truth of Christian claims, but the negative condition of exile. Jews came to be seen as witnesses in the very desperation of their status. They must be allowed to survive, but never to thrive; their “backs” must be “bent down always.” Their homelessness and misery are the proper punishments for their refusal to recognize the truth of the Church’s claims. And more — their misery is yet another *proof* of those claims.

The legacy of Augustine’s teaching on the Jews is a double-edged sword. On one side, against Chrysostom and even Ambrose, it requires an end to all violent assaults against synagogues, Jewish property, and Jewish persons. Jews are henceforth exempt from the Church-sanctioned, state-sponsored campaign to obliterate religious difference. Polytheists will disappear from the Roman world because they were given the choice to convert or die. Jews could have disappeared then, too. “Judaism endured in the West for two reasons,” Jacob Neusner writes. “First, Christianity permitted it to endure, and, second, Israel, the Jewish people, wanted it to. The fate of paganism in the fourth century shows the importance of the first of the two factors.”³³

It is not too much to say that, at this juncture, Christianity “permitted” Judaism to endure because of Augustine. “His teaching on the special place of Israel and the Jews in the economy of Christian redemption,” Fredriksen writes, “. . . protected Jewish communities in Europe for centuries.”³⁴ As the eighteenth-century Jewish philosopher Moses Mendels-

sohn put it, but for Augustine's "lovely brainwave, we would have been exterminated long ago."³⁵ In contrast to other possibilities of the era, his attitude is deeply humane, and indeed implies a critique of the by then triumphant Constantinian ideal, embodied in Constantine's sword. In this passage from *The City of God*, there is more than an implication of critique of what the imperial Church, the Christian empire, has put in place: "But think of the cost of this achievement! Consider the scale of those wars, with all that slaughter of human beings, all the human blood that was shed . . . a man who experiences such evils, or even thinks about them, without heartfelt grief, is assuredly in a far more pitiable condition, if he thinks himself happy simply because he has lost all human feeling."³⁶

On the other side, Augustine's relatively benign attitude toward Jews is rooted still in assumptions of supersessionism that would prove to be deadly. The "witness" prescription attributed to him — Let them survive, but not thrive! — would underlie the destructive ambivalence that marked Catholic attitudes toward Jews from then on. Ultimately, history would show that such double-edged ambivalence is impossible to sustain without disastrous consequences. For a thousand years, the compulsively repeated pattern of that ambivalence would show in bishops and popes protecting Jews — but from expressly Christian mobs that wanted to kill Jews because of what bishops and popes had taught about Jews. Such a teaching that wants it both ways was bound to fail, as would become evident at every point in history when Jews presumed, whether economically or culturally or both, to even think of thriving. This is the legacy that haunts the Catholic Church into the twenty-first century, a perverse legacy from which, despite the twentieth-century's jolts, the Church is not yet free.

"Allow me this, I beseech you," Augustine prayed in the fourth chapter of his *Confessions*, "to trace again in memory my past deviations."³⁷ So he did, throughout the book. And so do we here. There is a kind of tracing through deviation in such an understanding, requiring as it does a direct look at abject failure — abject *Christian* failure. It also requires a restored sense of longing, *Christian* longing, for another way. What could more sharply prompt in Christians such a wish for forgiveness and redemption than this story? Are we reduced to gratitude for the day when one of us found a way, through a jury-rigged theology if ever there was one, to justify the cry "Do not slay them!"? Yes, we are.

The Seamless Robe

YEA, DOGS ARE round about me; a company of evildoers encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet.” The words are from Psalm 22, and we recall the way the first, grief-struck friends of Jesus, gathering in something like a healing circle, had found consolation and meaning in such passages. The stunning loss of Jesus and the shocking violence of his death at the hands of the Romans were somehow mitigated by the way the beloved old Scriptures could name such an unspeakable experience. “I can count all my bones — they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them.”¹

We saw in an earlier chapter how, over a period of years in the immediate aftermath of the death of Jesus, a Passion narrative was constructed, and how many of its details were drawn not from events as they actually happened — the scattered followers of Jesus would have known little about such details — but from the Scripture passages that they were reading together in those early circles. And we just saw, in Augustine, how that blurring of “history remembered” and “prophecy historicized,” in Crossan’s terms, had come to form the supersessionist prophecy-fulfillment structure of Christian attitudes toward Jews.

A detail drawn from Psalm 22 for use in the Passion narrative has special poignancy for our story now. As we saw, that psalm was the source of what we read in the Gospel of John: “When the soldiers had crucified Jesus they took his garments and made four parts, one for each soldier. But his tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom; so they said to one another, ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.’”²

By the time the Gospel of John was written, at the end of the first century, it is likely that no one was still alive who had firsthand knowledge of how the Passion story had been composed, that the account was, in some large measure, the product of “prophecy historicized.” And it was then, in

response to pressures from “the Jews,” that the crucial interpretive flip occurred, with the claim that the Passion narrative was “history remembered.”³ Thus John says about the throwing of the dice for the Seamless Robe, “This was to fulfill the scripture. ‘They parted my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.’ So the soldiers did this.”⁴

If the Old Testament prophesied it, and if the New Testament fulfilled it, then how could the Jews deny the claim made in the name of Jesus? We have seen how this essential concept of Christology — Christ as fulfillment — stands, in Ruether’s phrase, at the “left hand” of Christian Jew-hatred. In the conflict between the Church and the Synagogue, every detail of the Passion story can be turned into a debating point, even the shirt of Jesus. Its seamlessness was a proof of his Messiahship. And how in the world did his mother weave such a thing anyway?

We saw how the legend of Saint Helena’s discoveries in the Holy Land served the purpose of her son’s campaign to Christianize the empire, and indeed, for centuries, the univocal solidarity of Christendom was based on the veneration of relics associated through her with Jerusalem. So relics were a bridge not only in time but in space. Not incidentally, Helena’s discoveries — the True Cross, the instrument of deicide long hidden by Jews; the Magi, as far-off witnesses to what nearby Jews denied — sharpened the conflict between Christians and Jews. As the Scriptures of Israel were used in the first and second centuries to “prove” Christian claims, so were Helena’s discoveries in the fourth century — and for centuries afterward. What matters here is that she is remembered as finding not only the True Cross and the corpses of the Three Kings, but also that miraculously woven robe, which in John’s reading was itself proof that the Jews were wrong. And what did Saint Helena do with that robe? She brought it back, right then, to her beloved hometown of Trier.

The story, as still recounted by tour guides today and hinted at in Trier’s tourist brochure,⁵ says that Helena donated her palace to the young Church, and that it was leveled, to be replaced immediately by the first great Christian edifice in the north of Europe, constructed to enshrine the Seamless Robe. Another view suggests, as we saw, that the palace, where Crispus was living, was leveled on Constantine’s order as part of his attempt to obliterate the memory of the son he murdered. Ultimately, the palace was replaced by the sibling churches that stand there today: the *Liebfrauen-kirche*, that small thirteenth-century gem, perhaps the first Gothic church in Germany, whose cruciform rotunda is a sort of religious womb, and the much larger, more imperial cathedral, dating in part to

Helena's fourth century, but mainly to the eleventh. The cathedral was built to house, and still houses in its sanctuary, the sacred Seamless Robe of Jesus. The tradition developed that the relic was kept hidden from public view, and today it rests behind the high altar in the *Heiltumskammer*, a kind of enclosed tabernacle from which a mystical light glows, but to which no one is admitted.

The hidden Robe was put on open display only three times in the twentieth century, each time for a period of weeks. One of those, as it happened, was in August and September of 1959. The archbishop had ordered the Robe's display, inviting Catholics to give thanks to God for the finally achieved recovery from World War II — that year, the restoration of heavily bombed Trier was complete. It was only in writing this book, and traveling to Trier again not long ago, that I remembered that 1959 display was the occasion of my youthful visit to the town. At last I understood that my mother, my brothers, and I were there to see the Robe of Christ, and to give thanks. For a long time, in my mind, I associated my glimpse of the Robe — it was a brown tunic, suspended above the altar as on a clothesline, looking to my willfully irreverent eye like a soiled extralarge T-shirt — with the German Passion play to which I referred in Part One. I assumed I had seen that Passion play here. But in August and September?

I had a distinct memory of a costumed Jesus bound hand and foot, wearing that very robe. I remembered Pilate turning away to wash his hands. I remembered Pilate's face, contorted with disgust at the Jews who wanted Jesus dead. I remembered Judas, the hook of his nose, his hands clutching at coins. All these images had fed my hatred of those who'd killed my Lord. When I tried to plumb those memories, returning to Germany recently, I learned that the Passion play tradition had not taken hold in the Rhineland. Holy Week services included the usual readings of Passion texts, but rarely as dramatizations. As for the display of the Robe in Trier, there would perhaps have been observances recalling the Gospel references to the garment, but no Passion play, and not in summer. Yet I was certain that I had seen the death of Jesus enacted in Germany. And I had seen the Robe.

This was true, but not in the way I first thought. My research trip took me back to Wiesbaden. The American enclave is still there, although now it bases the U.S. Army instead of the Air Force. The housing development, with its school and chapel, was spanking new in our time, but now, essentially unaltered and surrounded by the showy opulence of German pros-

perity, it has the neglected feel of public housing. Atop a hill that is still called Hainerberg is the tidy shopping center, now the PX, but in our time the BX, the base exchange. It is a small strip mall worthy of any midcentury American suburb. There was the snack bar where we hung out after school, a Burger King now, but otherwise just as I remembered it. And across the parking lot was the Taunus Theater, the movie house named for the nearby mountain range. The Taunus! One of the military's perks in postwar Europe was a steady flow from Hollywood, movies for a quarter, and I had been there every Friday and Saturday night.

I realized that I had seen that supremely detached but, compared to the Jews, benign Pontius Pilate on the screen of the Taunus Theater, probably with my girlfriend at my side, instead of my mother. The scene was not from a Passion play, as I'd thought, but from a costume epic starring Richard Burton. Pontius Pilate was played by Richard Boone, later famous as the cowboy carrier of a business card that read "Have Gun, Will Travel." Now I understood that I associated that film, in my memory, with the tunic in Trier because it was *The Robe*. I recently rented the video, described on its case as "an awesome, uplifting Biblical blockbuster." It says everything about the quality of filmmaking that *The Robe's* two Academy Award nominations were for costumes and set decoration. "Richard Burton stars as the Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion, Marcellus Gallio," the promotional copy said, "who wins the Robe gambling at the foot of the Cross — and whose life is changed forever by it." Marcellus, naturally, embraces the truth to which the Robe testifies, the truth that the Jews in the movie reject. Once again, Roman virtue — the Passion play theme as carried forward by Hollywood — stands in contrast to the stiff-necked recalcitrance of Jews. The Robe was thus fixed in my mind as a symbol, and in my memory as a madeleine, of Jewish evil.

Not long ago, I stood alone in the rear balcony of the Trier cathedral, where I had stood in 1959 with my mother for our viewing of the Robe. (We'd been shown to that spot as VIPs. It had offered a clear view above the crush, across the length of the nave toward the suspended tunic.) At last I could recognize in my own experience the foundational human flaw of faulty memory — how I had displaced one image of the Robe (Richard Burton's) for another (Saint John's). In this I myself had recapitulated the tragic pattern of this narrative.

As I focused on the gleaming *Heiltumskammer*, the tabernacle concealing the Robe, the welter of feelings I had experienced came back to me. Within days of being here in 1959, I would start my senior year at

Wiesbaden High School. Soon my mother, father, and brothers would return to the United States without me. I would stay behind to finish school, living in the dormitory where, unknown to my parents, my girlfriend also resided. I would be free to give myself to her, to football, to a new sense of myself as something other than pious. This forbidden hope grew in my throat, and I remembered looking across at the Robe of Jesus hanging there, right there, and thinking to myself, Who are they kidding? The doubt I had not allowed myself in Cologne blossomed in Trier. Corpses of the Three Kings? Give me a break. Inwardly, "I chattered away," as Saint Augustine described an equivalent moment, "as somebody in the know."⁶

Augustine emerges in my free association here perhaps because of his mother, Saint Monica. "For she loved having me with her, as all mothers do, only she much more than most."⁷ When I read such lines, a shiver of recognition runs through me. As I stood recently in the cathedral in Trier, I remembered what it was to stand beside my mother, knowing she was praying for me. I have never completely come out from under the mixed feeling of being doomed by that love. Yet to be the son of such a mother is to be discreetly but immeasurably blessed, for, as one sees eventually, the winding round and round is the spiral of forgiveness that extends to both of us. A son becomes a man when he sees his mother as a human being as much in need of mercy as he is, and then when he extends that mercy himself. And what else has he been longing to do all his life? What he can at last offer to her, he can at last accept himself.

The question that hit me in the cathedral was, How could I have forgotten what my mother and I were looking at together while she prayed? How could I have forgotten what had actually brought us to Trier? And why had my glimpse of the venerated Robe slipped into a received memory of a generic Passion play? The answer, all at once, was obvious. Not until I was in the presence of the suspended piece of cloth had I acknowledged my indifference to it. Everyone around me, including my mother, was swept up in sacred emotion. "It is impossible," one reads in Augustine, "that the son of these tears should be lost."⁸ But I felt nothing — nothing, that is, in relation to the Robe. It seemed a secret declaration of independence to have set myself apart from this particular form of piety, and in relation to that, I felt exhilarated.

I was questioning, of course, whether the Robe was real — whether, in other words, that Robe *there* was real. We were told that science had established its age and seamlessness, but had that cloth in fact wrapped the skin of Jesus? If it had not, I was free. I was free, in my mind, to leave Mom,

Mary, and Helena behind, free to love a girl who was *not* somebody's mother. Everything rode on the Robe, and instinctively I had made my choice — even if later I would reenter the world of the *Liebefrau* by joining the *Kirche*. But for now I was out, young, free. It did not occur to me to ask, as Crossan would force me to ask years later, whether the Robe, as described by the Gospel of John — or Matthew's Magi, for that matter — had ever existed at all. It was enough to have my secret, and its liberation. A short while later, my family went to Italy where we had our audience with the pope. It was then that I knelt with Mom before the *Pietà*, secretly, shamefully aroused by the swan-like neck of the mother of God. From the Vatican, my mother, father, and brothers went to Naples, to embark on a ship for home, while I stayed behind for the rest of my senior year. I saw my family off at the Stazione Termini, waving my handkerchief as their train pulled away as if I were sad. Then I exploded out into the Piazza Barberini and up the elegant Via Veneto, past the American embassy, where I imagined myself a young Foreign Service officer, a spy. Free! My joy was shameful to me, but also it was precious, as were my unleashed unbelief and the lust I was determined to act on as soon as my own later train returned me to Wiesbaden. Of all this, my mother, in whom it was my solemn duty to confide everything, knew nothing.

Mother. The Catholic faith of Europe had bound us. And now I wanted the bond to break — “She wept bitterly to see me go and followed me to the water's edge.” This is Augustine, except in his case Monica is the one doing the seeing-off. He is setting sail from Carthage, without her. But she was

clinging to me with all her strength in the hope that I would either come home or take her with me. I deceived her with the excuse that I had a friend whom I did not want to leave until the wind rose and his ship could sail. It was a lie, told to my own mother — and such a mother! . . . But she would not go home without me, and it was all I could do to persuade her to stay that night in a shrine dedicated to Saint Cyprian not far from the ship. During the night, secretly, I sailed away, leaving her alone to her tears and her prayers . . . The wind blew and filled our sails, and the shore disappeared from sight. The next morning, she was wild with grief . . . proof that she had inherited the legacy of Eve, seeking in sorrow what with sorrow she had brought into the world. But at last she ceased upbraiding me for my deceit and my cruelty, and turned again to you to offer her prayers for me. She went back to her house, and I went on to Rome.⁹

Oddly, it was in Rome that my version of this scene took place — an Irish American version, lacking in histrionics yet full of equivalent feelings. I loved the Via Veneto for its *palazzi*, the imposing mansions and villas of the richest people in the world. It was a street without churches — no churches for me. I returned to Wiesbaden, where I was happy to be, finally, on the wrong side of the Rhine.

In my recent visit, I discovered that the Trier Cathedral also possesses one of the three nails of the True Cross (one of the other nails Saint Helena had given to her son, who had it promptly melted down for use in a new battle helmet). I also learned that nearby stands the Church of St. Matthias, which entombs the remains of that apostle. Helena is credited with bringing what was left of him to Trier as well, no doubt to invincibly arm her hometown for the coming relic wars. Why Matthias? He was the apostle elected, according to Acts, to take the place of the suicide Judas.¹⁰ Matthias, replacing the traitorous Jew, was supersessionism personified.

The great relics of Trier, and the city's all-trumping tie with Helena herself, enabled it to maintain its religious, and therefore political, primacy over Mainz and Cologne for centuries. But Helena's relics did something else, too. In part because of the cults attached to these particular totems of the Passion story, Trier developed as a center of Christian hatred of Jews. We will return to this region during the Crusades, the Enlightenment, and the Nazi period in subsequent sections of this book. Suffice to note here, for example, that in 1349, Trier was one of the places where the scapegoating of Jews for the Black Plague was most extreme — townspeople murdered the entire Jewish community. Jews gradually returned to Trier, but in 1418 they were driven from the city, well ahead of the 1492 expulsion from Spain.

For all these reasons, from its origin in "prophecy historicized," to its role as a "proof" denied, to its close association with the pointedly "non-Roman" deicide, the venerated Seamless Robe became an eloquent symbol of all that Christians hold against Jews. I said earlier that the archbishop ordered the Robe put on display as a way of giving thanks in 1959, and I learned recently that thanksgiving had been the constant religious meaning of the rare unveilings. But there is political meaning here as well. By displaying this relic only rarely, the pitch of popular interest in it — and in Trier — was maintained. The Robe spawned periodic pilgrimages that enabled a literally backwater town on the Moselle to compete with trading centers of the Rhine. The Robe reinforced Trier's connection to Helena,

who had surpassed her omnipotent son in being a saint of the Latin Church. Political uses of the Robe are nothing new.

In 1959, I saw how it works with my own eyes. We understood the properly unspoken assumption from our place among the dignitaries in the balcony, looking across at the shirt of Jesus, that thanksgiving for the recovery of West Germany was offered as much to the United States as to God. But were we, perhaps, really being thanked for refusing until then — our Cold War strategy against Moscow required a virtuous ally in Bonn — to hold the German nation responsible for its most heinous crime?

In 1891, the last time save one that the Robe had been displayed, the archbishop of Trier had been thanking God for the end of the anti-Catholic Kulturkampf, or culture war, and the restoration of the rights of Catholics in the Rhineland. (The monks of Maria Laach were allowed to return in 1892 from an exile that had lasted most of a century, and their ancient title to the abbey was restored in 1893.) Clearly this was a world where no hard and fast distinction between religion and politics had been possible, even after the Enlightenment, so why shouldn't the unveiled Seamless Robe, a symbol of political joy, have been lifted up before the believing eyes of a relieved people? I said before that the display of the Robe in 1959 was one of three such occasions in the century. In fact, it was the second.¹¹ My mother and I did not know that. We did not know the date of the first, or what it implied. Neither the guides nor the cathedral's brochures mentioned it. We stood in the VIP section knowing nothing. Nothing about Germany — the SS an exception! And nothing about the Roman Catholic Church. By the time I returned to Trier to research this book, I had learned a thing or two, but I was still unprepared for what I learned then. The previous showing of the Seamless Robe had taken place before throngs of rejoicing pilgrims in the summer of 1933.

In that year of Hitler's coming to power, the Vatican signed its concordat with the Third Reich. By doing so, the Catholic Church became the first foreign power to enter into a bilateral treaty with Hitler. I knew that. I even knew that in 1933 the Roman Catholic hierarchy of Germany had overridden an earlier ban on Catholic membership in the Nazi Party. But the Robe? However dubious its claim to a strictly scientific authenticity, the tunic's having been venerated as Jesus' own garment for perhaps fifteen hundred years had invested it with sacredness of another kind. On the occasion of my recent visit, I was far from indifferent to that history. I could no longer stand in the presence of the Robe's tabernacle and feel nothing. So the question hit me with unexpected force: Had the

Robe been enlisted in a rapprochement with Hitler? I stood before the *Heiltumskammer*, and, in truth, I deflected the question by turning it into a prayer.

Later, I asked it of my guide: What was the archbishop of Trier expressing thanks for in 1933? What were all those devout Germans celebrating? The guide winced, sorry to be asked. "There was among Catholics," she said with a shrug, "a feeling that things would work out."

The Danger of Ambivalence

THE CROSS AT Auschwitz continues to be a flashpoint, and it symbolizes the complexity of Catholic attitudes. When the Catholic nationalist referred to at the beginning of this book was indicted in a Polish court in Oświęcim for having led the campaign to erect hundreds of small crosses in the field around the large papal cross at the wall of the death camp, he was charged with inciting hate against Jews. "I only said the truth," he proclaimed, "and will prove it in court." Later, in 1999, as we saw, the Polish senate passed a law requiring the small crosses to be removed, but making the papal cross permanent.¹ This despite the fact that a Vatican commission, in response to Jewish objections, had proposed the removal even of the papal cross "to an appropriate alternative site." But there was a telling ambivalence in the Catholic hierarchy's response, and now, perhaps, we can more fully take the measure of that ambivalence.

The Polish Catholics who had acted in defiance of the apparent intentions of the Polish pope, and of the explicit recommendation of the Vatican commission, could have pointed not only to local Church support² but to a strong signal that had just come from Rome on another, but related matter. Only three weeks before the new crosses had been erected, the Vatican had announced that Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, the wartime archbishop of Zagreb, Croatia, was to be regarded as a martyr and would be beatified the following October, the penultimate step to sainthood. Stepinac died in 1962 while under house arrest by the Communist government of Yugoslavia. He was a heroic opponent of Stalinism, but his prior role as the primate of a national church in whose name unspeakable atrocities were committed by the pro-Nazi Ustashi made observers ask what the Vatican could be thinking. It was clear that Stepinac had been condemned by the Tito regime for political reasons, that he had been un-

justly prosecuted for crimes he could not prevent. Exoneration, perhaps. But Jews and Catholics both could ask why a man who nevertheless embodied the Church's flawed responses to events of World War II should be elevated to sainthood?

As at Auschwitz, the conflict was over how the Holocaust would be remembered. This is the issue with which we opened this book, and now we can begin to see how the Jewish-Catholic conflict at Auschwitz crystallizes the competing rivalry that goes back to the generation after Jesus; to the decisive split illustrated by the distance between the New Testament and the Mishnah; to the habit of mind, born of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, according to which the new supersedes the old. In Poland, the cross at the death camp wall was seen by some Catholics as a commemoration of the many Catholics who had died there; in the disputed field itself, it was said, the Nazis had executed some 150 Polish Catholics. But were they to overshadow the memory of about a million and a half Jews who died at Auschwitz?

Jews seemed sensitive to the complexities of the cross as a symbol of a redemptive notion of suffering and death that seemed a violation of a primary commitment to life, as an ultimate religious value, and as a symbol of a totalitarian universalism, rooted in Constantine, that violated pluralism, which was for Jews an ultimate social value. Thus the Christian planting of the cross in that place overrode all possible good intentions, and even suggested other intentions: "Christianizing" the Holocaust, using Christian categories to "redeem" the genocide, using the cross to deny the role of ancient Christian Jew-hatred in preparing the soil for the Holocaust — as if the Nazis were sprung as Teutonic pagans from the primeval forest and not from the heart of Christian Europe. All of this could have no other effect than the demeaning of the overwhelmingly Jewish presence at Auschwitz.

Memory was at issue in the Stepinac case, too. There is evidence of his courage in opposing the Ustashi program of forced conversion of Orthodox Serbs and related brutalities. A U.S. State Department report released in 1998 put the number of Ustashi victims at 700,000, "most of them Serbs." The report commented, "Croatian Catholic authorities condemned the atrocities committed by the Ustashi, but remained otherwise supportive of the regime."³ That was true of Stepinac. He had welcomed the coming to power of the mini-Hitler Ante Pavelić in 1941, and he never overtly broke with the so-called Independent State of Croatia or its dictator.⁴ Stepinac had supported Jews in Croatia. In 1937, he helped Jewish ref-

ugees from Germany. In 1941, he asked Pavelić “to treat the Jews as humanely as possible,” and when the deportation of Croatian Jews began, he protested privately to the government.⁵ In sermons, he denounced mistreatment of groups defined “by race or nation,” but he did not preach openly about the fate of Jews. His defenders, like those of the even more reticent Pius XII, argue that the one resounding frontal assault by a Catholic hierarchy in defense of Jews, in the Netherlands in 1942, led to the rounding up even of the Jews who had converted to Catholicism. “The courage of Holland’s Catholic bishops and clergy is undeniable,” one defender of Pius XII wrote in 1998. “But their heroism came at a terrible price: 79% of Holland’s Jews — 110,000 men, women and children — were murdered, the highest percentage of any Nazi-occupied nation of Western Europe.”⁶ That qualifier “Western” is apt, since in Croatia, to the east, where the hierarchy, including Stepinac, was circumspect, 85 percent of the Jewish population — almost 39,000 out of 45,000 — was annihilated.⁷

None of this marks Cardinal Stepinac as a war criminal. Perhaps he did what he could. But sainthood? Croatia was not the Netherlands; in Croatia the Nazis were welcomed as friends and allies. The Roman Catholic Church of Croatia, over which Stepinac presided, was associated with the pro-Nazi regime’s policies.⁸ Catholic newspapers were among its strongest supporters, and Catholic priests were key to the postwar survival of some of the Ustashi’s worst murderers. As a postwar fugitive, Pavelić himself was sheltered for two years in Rome, for most of that time in the College of San Girolamo, the residence of Croatian priests working at the Vatican. Croatian clergy in Rome were part of the infamous “Rat Line” through which numerous Nazi war criminals, with the collusion of the U.S. Army, escaped to Latin America. The priests helped Pavelić get to Argentina in 1947.⁹ “Although no evidence has been found to directly implicate the Pope or his advisers in the post-war activities of the Ustashi in Italy” — this is the conclusion of the 1998 State Department report — “it seems unlikely that they were entirely unaware of what was going on.”¹⁰ This dark episode hangs over the Catholic Church, and one must wonder if the move to canonize Stepinac is intended, finally, to dispel it.

The Polish Catholics who defied every Jewish expectation by planting crosses at Auschwitz in the summer of 1998 had to have noticed the Vatican’s similar defiance of expectation with the nearly simultaneous Stepinac announcement. What both incidents lay bare is the ambivalence at the center of Catholic attitudes toward Jews. There is ambivalence even in the obviously troubled Catholic conscience about the Holocaust:

Stepinac's elevation to the threshold of sainthood follows the canonization of Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan friar who voluntarily took the place of another prisoner (not a Jew) in the starvation barracks, but who had also served as the editor of an antisemitic Catholic journal. The week after Stepinac was formally beatified in Rome, in October 1998, the convert Edith Stein — one of those rounded up in Holland after the bishops' protest — was canonized. "The canonization of Edith Stein," the novelist Mary Gordon commented in the Jewish periodical *Tikkun*, "is the wishful re-dreaming of Europeans who have a stake in believing that the Holocaust was something other than what it was: the determination to obliterate the Jewish people."¹¹ We will return to the story of Edith Stein later.

The positive side of contemporary Catholic ambivalence is vivid. Since the end of World War II, there have been the theological revolution of Vatican II, with its rejection of the deicide charge and its affirmation of God's ongoing covenant with the Jewish people; the remarkable grassroots flourishing of Jewish-Catholic dialogue; and the serious effort of the Polish pope to confront the legacy of Catholic antisemitism. But there remain rigid lines drawn around beliefs that may not be changed and around questions that may not be asked. Already we have seen the deeply problematic legacy of Jew hatred in foundational Christian texts, in the implicitly anti-Jewish Christian idea of revelation as prophecy fulfillment, and most damaging of all, in the dominant Christian theology of Jesus, not only as the enemy of the Jewish people but as the Son of God who obliterates the integrity of all other ways to God. Catholic ambivalence is nowhere more evident than in the way in which the Church now officially rejects supersessionism while firmly defending its scriptural and theological underpinnings.

Catholic ambivalence toward Judaism dates, as we have seen, to the beginning. Jewish followers of Jesus found consolation in their Scriptures; but then, forgetting how the crucifixion narrative was constructed in the weeks, months, and years after his death, successors began to use those same Scriptures against Jews who failed to recognize the crucified Jesus as the longed-for Messiah, or who failed even to long for a Messiah. Ambivalence is implied in the very name that came to be applied to those Jewish Scriptures — the "Old Testament," which was valued for being ancient but was superseded for not being "New."

The pattern of ambivalence became set as one generation's mistake was compounded by the next, and made more dangerous. Jewish-Christian conflict in the first century took on ominous new meanings in the fourth, by which time Christians had all but forgotten that those early conflicts

had been among people *all of whom were Jews*. Jewish rejection became a source not just of feelings of being threatened, but of feelings of hatred. Even as they evolved, such reactions remained ambivalent because the Jewish enemy was still the intimate enemy; the Jew as other was still the brother, the sibling rival. Christians hardly noticed when, as the “parting of the ways” became dramatic and the centers of Jewish life shifted away from the centers of Roman and Christian life, Jews stopped thinking of the Church as competition. If one sibling opts out of the rivalry, the one remaining can feel it more intensely than ever. That, in effect, is what began to happen when Christianity tied permission for Jewish survival to the formal theological role of Jews as the permanent negative other.

All these manifestations of ambivalence became welded to the intellectual and political framework of the Church only with the Augustinian formulation: Jews may survive, but never thrive. A noble witness to the prophetic sources of Christian faith was also the witness of “bent backs” and “dispersal.” That Jews suffered proved that Jews deserved to suffer. The circle of logic that began with Augustine was complete. In his time, the consequences of this position were benign compared to what befell heretics and pagans. But once again, following the now set pattern, a later generation — that “trail of pseudo-Augustinian anti-Jewish writings,” in Fredriksen’s phrase — applying the inherited principle in changed circumstances, would misunderstand its original meaning, and then the consequences would no longer be benign, not even relatively so.

“Theological negation, political toleration, and practical limitation” is the way one Jewish scholar, Robert Chazan, summed up the ancient legacy of Catholic ambivalence toward Jews. “These elements constituted a complex doctrine, and therein lay grave danger. In untroubled times, to negate Judaism while tolerating Jews was perhaps feasible; in periods of agitation and stress, the complex and contradictory doctrine was apt to disintegrate.”¹² Disintegration, in this context, is another word for violence. It is no accident that this citation, elaborating the volatile inner meaning of the cross at Auschwitz and a Croatian cardinal’s beatification, is from a book entitled *European Jewry and the First Crusade*. That the first organized murderers of Jews carried the cross of Jesus Christ on their shields has shamed the Christian conscience whenever it has learned the story. But the juxtaposition of symbol and deed was no coincidence. That the theological negation at the heart of ancient and respectable attitudes toward Judaism was bound to lead to violence against Jews becomes clear in the sequence of events that began in 1096.

Before turning to the eleventh century, however, here is one last note

from the twentieth. The covert Croatian Rat Line, the escape route used by Nazis to flee Europe after the war, operating in Rome from a Vatican-related Catholic college, under the authority of Cardinal Stepinac, was put at the service of a fugitive from the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal. He was the German who had headed up the Gestapo in Lyons, France — Klaus Barbie. Like Pavelić before him, the “Butcher of Lyons” escaped to Latin America. In the 1980s, he would be captured, deported to France, convicted of crimes against humanity, and sentenced to prison, where he died in 1991. If Barbie has a place in this narrative, aside from the large debt he owed to the Roman Catholic ambivalence that had helped him escape, it is because of his place of origin. He was born, raised, and educated in the geographic and moral center of this story — Constantine’s square one, Helena’s hometown, the repository of the Seamless Robe, my mother’s cherished pilgrimage site, the realm of my own awakening. And now we must recognize it as the place where crusaders first moved against Jews, launching a season of terror throughout the Rhineland, letting fly the exterminating angel that overshadowed the millennium. It is time to return to Trier.