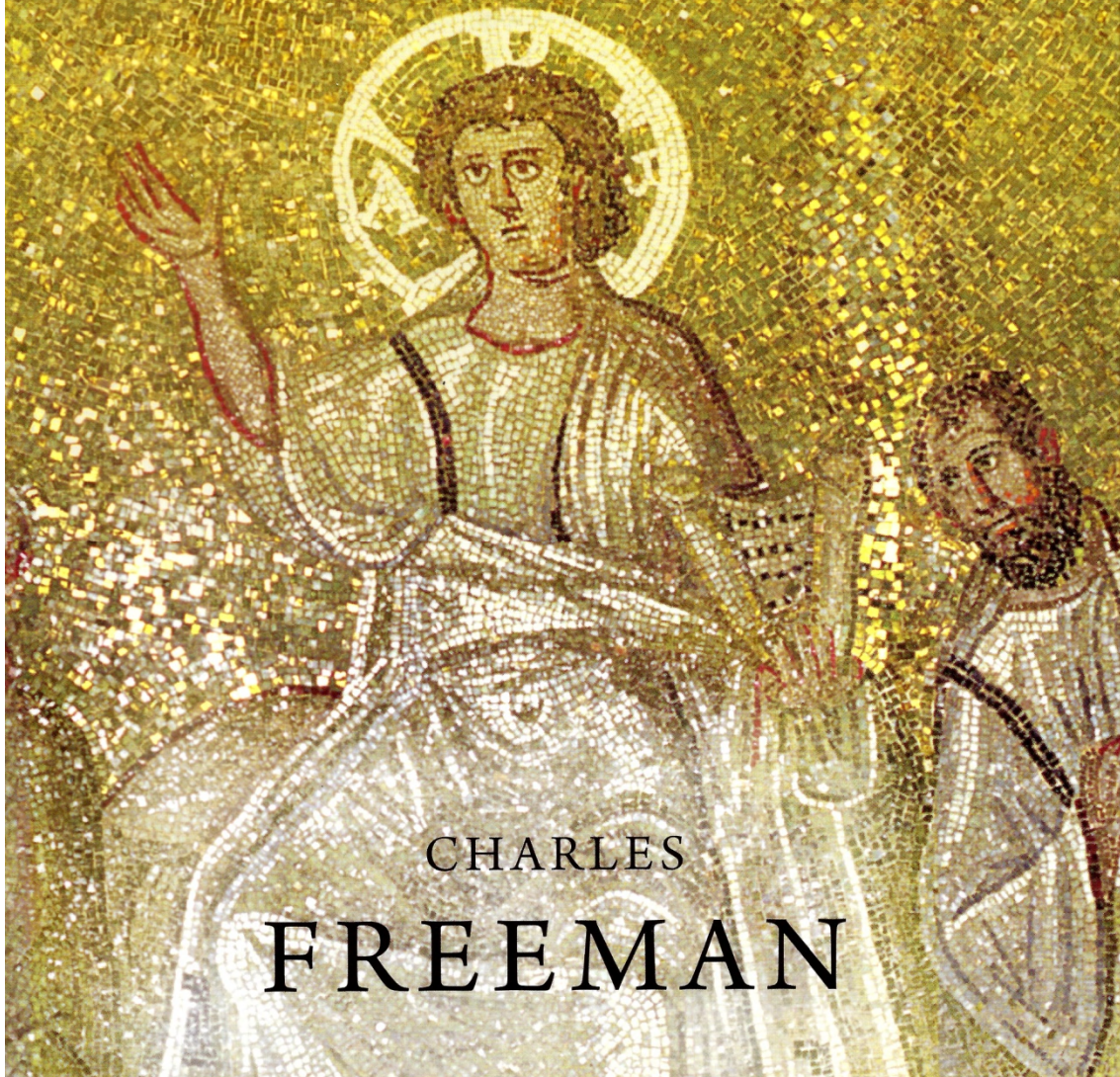


A NEW HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY



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Preface

IN AD 30, A JEWISH PREACHER FROM GALILEE CALLED JESUS ARRIVED IN Jerusalem for the Passover. A crowd of his followers had come with him and the bustle and excitement soon spread to the Jerusalem crowds. Jesus had talked of ‘a coming kingdom’, a spiritual and political revolution that would renew Israel. The authorities, the Jewish priesthood and their Roman overlords, felt threatened by the disturbance. They arrested and crucified Jesus, the best way of publicly terrorizing his followers. It appeared they had snuffed out the movement.

Somehow, in the bleak hours and days that followed, a core of Jesus’ followers began to conceive of him as something more than an ordinary mortal. There was talk that his tomb had been found empty and that favoured disciples had seen him risen from the dead. Then, after forty days at most, the appearances ceased, although some believed he would come again.

As the months and years passed and there was no second coming, his disciples began to speculate on whom Jesus might have been. They had a mass of Jewish titles to draw on — ‘Son of God’, ‘Messiah’, ‘Son of Man’, ‘Lord’, ‘Prophet’. For a Jew none of these implied divinity. ‘Son of God’ meant only one specially favoured by God; messiahship was associated with the (inevitably violent) liberation of Israel from foreign domination by one of ‘the royal house of David’. From the earliest days Christians debated and argued among themselves as to how one could find a coherent understanding of Jesus. In his anguished First Letter to the Corinthians, one of the oldest Christian texts to survive, the apostle Paul complained that his readers had divided into followers of himself, of the apostle Peter, of an intellectual, Apollos, and of Jesus now seen as *Christos*, ‘the anointed one’ (1 Corinthians 1:12-14).

This picture of Christians in debate may seem startling to some readers. All too often Christian doctrine is presented as fixed and unchallengeable, but even the slightest contact with the history of Christianity shows that this was never so. This book takes it for granted that there were competing traditions within the church and explores the difficulty in ever finding any one ‘true’ Christianity. In fact, it was only when the Roman emperors of the fourth century used the enormous coercive power and patronage at their command to insist on a uniform set of beliefs that one could talk in such terms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Motives of Constantine

LET ME NOW OBEDIENTLY SING ALOUD THE NEW SONG BECAUSE AFTER those terrifying darksome sights and stories, I was now privileged to see and celebrate such things as in truth many righteous men and martyrs of God before desired to see on earth and did not see, and to hear and did not hear ... a day bright and radiant, with no cloud overshadowing it, shone down with shafts of heavenly light on the churches of Christ throughout the world.' So, in the final chapter of his *History of the Church*, Eusebius rejoices at the toleration and patronage given to Christians by Constantine. Eusebius became a confidant of Constantine, wrote speeches for him, and after his death composed an adulatory life of his hero.

The transformation of the church that followed Constantine's involvement still shapes Christianity as we know it today. There is no knowing if the numbers of Christians would have continued to grow if they had been left to themselves but now the numbers expanded so fast that Eusebius complained of the hypocrisy of converts who had only joined because the going was good. Soon the church's authority figures, the bishops, were recruits to the service of the state. Their social and legal status grew enormously as did their wealth. Vast churches, glittering with gold and mosaics, were to be found in the major cities of the empire. Although the church continued to care for the poor, and was used by the state to do so, the transfer of resources to prestige building projects proved permanent, as walking through the streets of any medieval European city or viewing the megachurch complexes of the modern United States shows.

The role the emperors played in defining church doctrine was to prove enormously important. It was vital to have uniformity and good order although the church itself had no mechanism for achieving, let alone enforcing, a consensus on the intractable theological problems that consumed the energies of its more intellectual leaders. This was to be done by emperors — first by Constantine but,

more effectively, by Theodosius in the 380s. Their interventions were followed by confrontations with Judaism and paganism. Eventually a predominantly Christian state became established in both halves of a disintegrating empire. It went hand in hand with transfer of interest from the gospels, whose portrayal of a spiritual leader crucified by the Roman authorities fitted uneasily with the new regime, to the Old Testament, which had far more texts supporting an empire whose survival depended on success in war and, in so far as authority needed to be reinforced over a sinful population, the letters of Paul. Augustine's Paul became the cornerstone of western theology.

Constantine emerged from the breakdown of Diocletian's system of four imperial rulers. When his father, Constantius, died in York in 306, Constantine had been acclaimed as new emperor by his troops. He had no right to accept the promotion but he was ruthless in his opportunism. He knew how important it was to have the gods on his side: he soon had his court panegyrists proclaiming that as Constantius had ascended to heaven, the heavens had opened and he had been welcomed there by none other than Jupiter himself. Then the sun god Apollo had appeared in a vision to promise Constantine thirty years of rule while the image of Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun, a cult popular with his troops, appeared on his coins as late as 320. He claimed that his right to rule came from his descent from an earlier emperor, Claudius Gothicus (268-70). There is no evidence that Constantine exhibited any early allegiance to Christianity although he certainly showed religious instincts which tended towards monotheism.

The new Augustus of the eastern empire, Galerius, was forced to acquiesce in Constantine's status, recognising him first as a Caesar and then as Augustus, one of the two senior emperors. Even when Galerius finally succumbed to bowel cancer in 311, his successor, Licinius, accepted Constantine and married Constantine's half-sister to formalise a new imperial order. Constantine's territory included Britain, Gaul and Spain and he made his imperial headquarters on the northern border at Trier where his audience hall still stands. To the south, in Italy, another usurpation had taken place. One Maxentius, the son of Diocletian's Augustus, Maximian, had been proclaimed emperor by the Roman senate, and so ruled over Italy and, after defeating a rival, the African provinces. His usurpation was never accepted by Constantine or his fellow emperors in the east. A showdown was inevitable.

In 312, Constantine, who had honed his military skills with campaigns against Germanic and British tribes, led a carefully planned invasion of Italy. The north of Italy was secure behind him when he reached the outskirts of Rome in October. Maxentius met Constantine on the ancient Via Flaminia where it crossed the Tiber. He had replaced the Milvian Bridge with a bridge of boats, taken up position beyond them and stood to fight. It was a disaster. Maxentius' forces broke, the bridge of boats collapsed as his men retreated back over it and Maxentius drowned. Constantine entered Rome in triumph. His victory was trumpeted on the Arch (315) that still stands by the Colosseum in Rome flaunting its reliefs of the successful campaign. The emperor is shown alongside a chariot of the sun god that ascends to heaven while, in an inscription, the victory is attributed to the 'the highest divinity'.

However, other stories began to circulate. They suggested that it was not Jupiter, Apollo or even the Unconquered God of the Sun who had brought victory but the God of the Christians. Lactantius, close to Constantine as his son's tutor, told of a dream Constantine had had the night before the battle in which he had been told to place a sign of Christ (presumably the Chi-Rho, the first two letters in Greek of Christ's name) on the shields of his men. He had obeyed and won his victory. Twenty-five years later, a conflicting story appeared in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*. Eusebius claimed that Constantine had told him under oath that some time before the battle a cross of light had appeared in the sky to Constantine and his troops together with the words, 'By this sign you shall conquer'. Christ then appeared to tell Constantine to put Christian images on his standards.

The most likely explanation for these stories is that Constantine had already decided to bring Christianity under the auspices of the state and realised that the best way of doing this was to associate his dramatic victory with the Christian God. There was no precedent in the New Testament for the association of Christ with war other than a single reference in the Book of Revelation to a warrior, normally believed to be Christ, in a bloodstained garment on a white horse. When Eusebius wrote up the battle he had to find texts in the Old Testament, among them the overwhelming of Pharaoh's chariots in the Red Sea, as a prophecy of the collapsed Milvian Bridge. So was born an uneasy relationship between Christianity and the imperial state that relied heavily on Old Testament texts.

In 313 Constantine met Licinius in Milan. Together they issued an Edict of Toleration which extended to all in the east the same tolerance Constantine had already offered to Christians in the west: an end of persecution, freedom to follow their own religion and, now, restitution of property. The edict specifically recognised the right of all to follow their own cults in the hope that ‘the highest divinity, to whose worship we pay allegiance with free minds, may grant us in all things his wonted favour and benevolence’. The edict did nothing to privilege Christianity above other religious beliefs but it acknowledged that continued persecution was fruitless and that Christians needed to be welcomed fully into Roman society. This was the high point of religious toleration within the empire.

There was much more to Constantine’s Christianity than this. He soon showed that he was ready to give positive support to the bishops. Such patronage was not unusual; emperors had always favoured specific gods or used cults of their own personalities, Rome or the imperial family, as a means of consolidating their rule. Constantine now relieved the clergy of all civic duties, including taxes, a major concession, in the belief that the clergy ‘shall not be drawn away by any deviation and sacrifice from the worship that is due to the divinity ... for it seems that, rendering the greatest possible service to the deity, they most benefit the state’. Again this did not make Christianity the imperial religion. Constantine remained unbaptised (although this was normal practice when it made sense to leave the washing off of sins as close as possible to death) and he continued to use pagan symbols, such as the image of the sun god on his arch in Rome. Although Eusebius was to present every policy of the emperor as a sign of Christian commitment, many of Constantine’s later decrees were phrased in terms of a neutral monotheism which pagans could interpret as no more than a general support for a supreme deity. His laws on marriage were seen by Eusebius as Christian in intent but they were typical of what any conservative Roman might support. Eusebius also claimed that the emperor banned sacrificing, which was, in any case, in decline as a ritual, but it seems to have continued and the claim may only reflect Eusebius’ hopes that Christianity had finally triumphed over paganism.

Constantine, however, might have had a deeper personal commitment to Christ. There were occasions when he lectured his court on the evils of polytheism, the importance of worshipping Christ and the need to repent. The so-called *Oration to the Saints*, a speech that was probably composed in Latin in the 320s and then translated into Greek for audiences in the east after he had seized power there,

may well be a standard speech he delivered to audiences he encountered on his progresses around the empire but in it he attributes his good fortune as ruler to Providence and the protection of Christ. 'Be it my special province to glorify Christ, as well by the actions of my life, as by that thanksgiving which is due to him for the manifold and signal blessings which he has bestowed.' The *Oration* provides an important guide to Constantine's thought in that it links polytheism to social disorder. A single god was a more effective symbol of authority.

Constantine could hardly challenge the polytheism of the vast majority of his subjects but he could bolster the bishops. They were now important figures in their city communities at a time when other authority figures were under pressure. So Constantine went beyond releasing them from civic duties to boosting their powers in other ways. His church-building programme gave them control of local patronage. Some bishops were given grain supplies to hand out to the poor, responsibilities that fitted well with their traditional role as organisers of relief for their own congregations. They were granted legal powers that extended to the right to free slaves on the same grounds as other magistrates and to hear a wide range of cases. These moves were all the more effective because bishops were now so well known in their cities and were often in office for years.

The integration of bishops within the legal and institutional structure of the empire extended to include uniformity of belief and discipline within the church itself. As early as 313, a group of bishops from the African provinces had petitioned Constantine for help. It was the unresolved issue of how to deal with the *traditores*, those who had betrayed their faith under persecution. Out in the country areas, hardline survivors of Diocletian's persecution were determined to show no mercy to those clergy who had lapsed and they refused to accept the validity of any of their sacraments, even those administered before the persecutions. In the cities, and among those of higher social class, there was a more relaxed atmosphere, forgiveness was thought possible and the validity of early sacraments recognised. Battle lines were drawn, perhaps as much on social as doctrinal grounds. Each group elected its own bishop — Donatus for the hardliners and Caecilian for the moderates. At first Constantine passed the petitions on to advisory councils of bishops meeting in Rome and Gaul, but he gradually became more involved — he enjoyed meeting petitioners in person — and he was instrumental in deciding against the Donatists. He even went back on his policy of toleration and there was a short period of renewed persecution of the Donatists before he relented and let

them be. In Africa the imperial church, that of the Caecilianists, remained a minority drawn from the richer classes in the cities, but they received the goodwill and patronage of the emperor. Constantine was shaping a church ready to compromise with the state. For the Donatists, the empire continued as it had always been, something marginal and often antagonistic to Christian life, and the martyrs created by Constantine's 'Christian' state were as revered as the victims of earlier persecutions.

Constantine's wider ambitions remained unsatisfied and he now set his sights on securing the eastern empire. Licinius was gradually excluded from imperial decision-making, his head disappeared from coins issued by Constantine and the annual appointments to the consulships were now Constantine's choices alone. In 324, as the relationship broke down, Constantine found the excuse to invade the east. Once again the placing of the Chi-Rho on the imperial standards was said to have brought success in two major battles. Constantine soon removed his rivals. The captured Licinius was killed in 325 as was his ten-year-old son, Constantine's own nephew. Worse was to come. In 326, Constantine ordered the execution of his illegitimate son, Crispus. Crispus had proved a worthy commander in his own right and had held a consulship. Later gossip, from pagan sources, supplied the story that Constantine's wife Fausta was jealous of Crispus' preferment and feared that her own legitimate sons would be passed over. So she falsely accused Crispus of trying to rape her. Constantine accepted the story but was so appalled when he learned of the deception that he ordered the drowning of Fausta in a scalding bath. It is also alleged that his mother Helena was involved and one pagan report suggests that she was sent by her confessor on her famous pilgrimage to the Holy Land as a penance.

As Constantine consolidated his control over his new territories he realised that disorder among the Greek Christians was as widespread as it was in the west. The eastern empire was much more heavily Christianised with some hundreds of bishops. Intellectual life was competitive and different Christian communities and a mass of fringe groups such as the Manicheists vied with each other for converts. If the bishops were to be used in support of Constantine's rule, then their authority over their subordinates had to be upheld. The bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, for instance, faced two challenges. One was from a rival bishop, Melitius, who claimed he had been given the right to make his own ordinations in the diocese by the previous bishop of Alexandria, Peter, during the persecutions and he refused to surrender the privilege. The second was the famous confrontation with Arius, a presbyter in the city itself.

Arius was a charismatic figure, with a popular appeal — he expressed some of his teachings in catchy tunes and he had a loyal following in the city. The roots of the controversy are tangled. Arius claimed that he was representing traditional teaching in his views that Christ must, at some point, have been a later, but distinct, creation of God the Father. God's majesty made it impossible for him to share his nature with anything in the material world while Christ, as an inferior if still divine creation, could do so. Christ's inferior status was confirmed by his own words in the gospels, the frequent admissions that he only did the will of his Father who had sent him and whose purpose he did not fully know. Alexander, in contrast, preached 'one Lord Jesus Christ, begotten out of the Father, not in any bodily way but in an unutterable and inexplicable fashion'. This was hardly clear. It assumed that Jesus had always been part of the Godhead but was also begotten of his Father in a way that Alexander could not explain. The historian Socrates, writing a hundred years later, records that Arius challenged Alexander with the heresy of Sabellianism, that Jesus had been a temporary manifestation of God. Naturally Alexander decided to bring Arius into line. He summoned the Egyptian bishops to Alexandria and had them condemn him.

Arius refused to give in. He made off to the imperial city of Nicomedia where the bishop, one Eusebius, who had developed similar ideas from a teacher they had shared, backed him and gathered his own bishops in support.

Arius also had the sympathy of the historian Eusebius, whose own bishopric was the important coastal town of Caesarea, Herod's foundation, where Origen had taught. Eusebius had been strongly influenced by Origen's theology and had absorbed the idea that Christ was a later creation and subordinate to the Father (see p. 192). Another council of bishops meeting at Antioch in 325 appears to have taken Alexander's side and condemned Eusebius of Caesarea as a heretic.

For Constantine these were 'idle and trivial' speculations and did not have anything to do with the Divine law, 'leadership doctrines' or heresies. They could be resolved by following 'the Divine Commandment which enjoined on us all the duty of maintaining a spirit of Concord'. However, in this case, as Constantine's adviser the Spanish bishop Ossius discovered when he visited the region, the dispute was causing mayhem. 'Confusion everywhere prevailed: for one saw not only the prelates of the churches engaged in disputing, but the people also divided, some siding with one party, and some with the other. To so disgraceful an extent was this affair

carried, that Christianity became a subject of popular ridicule, even in the very theatres.' Constantine had to abandon his instinct to let the bishops sort things out for themselves and intervene directly. In 325 the bishops were summoned to the imperial residence at Nicaea with transport laid on to convey them there. Constantine hoped to settle not only the disputes over Arius but consolidate the authority of bishops and come to an agreed date for Easter, an issue which was causing more upheaval with rival communities celebrating the feast on different dates.

Those who assembled, probably between 200 and 250, although later legends fixed their number at 318, reflected the spread of the church. The largest contingent, some hundred bishops, came from Asia Minor, fifty arrived from Syria and Palestine and about twenty were from Egypt. Hardly any bishops came from western Europe, the bishop of Rome pleading ill health and sending only observers. Even so, the council could claim to be ecumenical, 'of the inhabited world'. All views were represented. Alexander came in person, of course, with his deacon Athanasius, a formidable contributor to later debates on Arianism. Eusebius of Nicomedia, the metropolitan bishop for Nicaea, spoke for Arius who, as a mere presbyter, could not participate. Eusebius of Caesarea was also there and left one of the fuller accounts of the council. It must have been an extraordinary gathering. Many bishops were said to carry the marks of their beatings and tortures at the hands of the persecutors. Now they were being welcomed by the emperor who, dressed in glorious robes and glittering with diamonds, would have been the nearest thing to divinity they had ever seen.

Medieval representations of the council show Constantine dominating the proceedings, as could be expected of the host and benefactor of all those seated before him. He could hardly miss the opportunity to stage-manage the assembly to achieve his ends. His instinct was always for order. In a letter to the peoples of the eastern empire the year before, he had described Christianity as 'the Law', the basis of a regulated way of life under the auspices of a single god. Whatever the theological issue, Alexander as the established bishop of the largest city in the east was more likely to have his backing than a presbyter who stirred up trouble by peregrinating through the eastern Mediterranean. The trick was to find a formula that supported Alexander's authority but around which the bishops with different perspectives could gather. Constantine's opening speech was masterly in framing the agenda

to this end. He said nothing about theology other than claiming that the perils of dissension were a greater threat than war. The settlement of the issues would not only please God but would be of immense favour to the emperor. Anyone who stepped out of line would be sure of Constantine's anger.

Yet some kind of theological consensus had to be forged. A major speech was given by Eusebius of Caesarea. He had the reputation for being the most learned man of his generation and he must have wished to restore his standing after his condemnation in Antioch. It was a carefully phrased oration that talked glowingly of Christ's divinity without specifically saying how and when he had been created. It was enough for his condemnation as a heretic to be overlooked. Yet the creed he suggested seems to have failed to convince because it left the central issue, of whether Christ had existed eternally or as a later creation, unresolved. Arius would have been able to claim that there was nothing in the formula with which he disagreed. Eusebius of Nicomedia, perhaps the senior bishop there, aroused greater anger when, according to one report, he produced a document which backed Arius. There was now confusion as charge and counter charge followed each other until Constantine intervened. As Eusebius reports, he tried, in halting Greek, to bring about unity, 'urging all towards agreement, until he had brought them to be of one mind and one belief on all the matters in dispute.' His means of doing so was a bombshell. He suggested, possibly on his own initiative, perhaps at the instigation of Ossius, that the correct way of describing the relationship between Father and Son was to declare them *homoousios*, 'of one substance'. The motive was probably to isolate Arius through inserting a phrase that his supporters would never accept.

It was, in fact, a clumsy way of expressing support for Alexander. The term *homoousios* was not to be found in scripture and quite what it meant, other than to express some kind of very close relationship between Father and Son which precluded a later act of creation, was difficult to define. Worse still, Paul of Samosata had used the term to describe the relationship between Christ as *logos* and God, and he had been declared heretical in the 260s. While one might be able to make some distinction between Paul's use of the word and its use at Nicaea, the odour of heresy lingered.

These reservations disappeared in the excitement of the moment. The cajoling of Constantine, his insistence on agreement and the sheer glamour of the occasion must have swept almost all to consensus. Not only was the *homoousios* formula

accepted but a number of anathemas aimed at Arius were also included in the creed that was passed. Any claim that there was a time that Christ had not been, that he was created, that he was of a different substance from God or that he could alter or change from the state in which he had been eternally, was condemned. Almost everyone signed up to it. Eusebius of Caesarea, who joined the majority, was deeply unsettled by the whole occasion and had to write to his congregation explaining why he had assented to the *homoousios* formula. He glosses over the problem as if it were of little import but his embarrassment is obvious. Arius and two bishops were formally excommunicated and Eusebius of Nicomedia was also deposed from his bishopric, apparently after he refused to sign the anathemas at the end of the creed.

Of course, as with many decisions made under pressure and in a charged atmosphere, as was certainly the case at Nicaea, the radical nature of what had been done became clear only when the bishops had departed. Constantine had achieved a praiseworthy consensus in the short term but with a formula that began to dissolve soon afterwards. The council, writes Mark Edwards, 'had canonised a term [*homoousios*] which being new, unbiblical and uninterpreted, could hardly fail to irritate the conscience'. There were immense philosophical problems in understanding how the two divine personalities related to each other if they were of the same substance but also distinct as Father and Son. Another term inserted during the debate was 'begotten', in that Christ was 'begotten, not made'. Here again the aim was to condemn Arius' idea that Christ was a later creation. So 'make' was rejected but some form of replacement had to be found. 'Begotten' was chosen, but surely 'begetting' involved an independent act of creation? The desire to overwhelm Arius had led to the sacrifice of theological good sense.

No one knows where the basic text of the Nicene creed originates; one report suggests Palestine, another Asia Minor. It was probably provided at short notice, possibly by Eusebius of Caesarea who did indeed claim that it was his local creed. The final version, with its additions, was compromised by the overwhelming desire to isolate Arius. One of the anti-Arian anathemas, the condemnation of the idea that the Son of God might be another *hypostasis*, or personality, within the Godhead, left it unclear whether Jesus was distinct from the Father at all — in other words it smacked of Sabellianism. More reflection would probably have avoided this. Nor was there any assertion of a Trinity. The only reference to the Holy Spirit was 'And I believe in the Holy Spirit'. The assembled bishops had missed their

chance to describe any relationship between the Spirit and Father and Son. One has to agree with Richard Hanson, the author of the fullest study of the affair, that 'the Creed was a mine of potential confusion and consequently most unlikely to be a means of ending the Arian controversy'. All this is understandable in the context of a council that was concerned more with backing the authority of the bishops and the state than with theological precision. No one could have imagined that the creed, even when modified at the Council of Constantinople in 381, would become the core of the Christian faith.

The following is the creed passed at Nicaea:

We believe in one God Father Almighty Maker of all things, seen and unseen:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten as only-begotten of the Father, that is of the substance [*ousia*] of the Father, God from God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial [*homoousios*] with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, both things in heaven and things on earth: who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and became man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead:

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say 'there was a time when he did not exist', [e.g. Arius and his followers] and 'Before being begotten he did not exist', and that he came into being from non-existence, or who allege that the Son of God is of another *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or is alterable or changeable, these the Catholic and Apostolic Church condemns.

It did not take long for Constantine to realise that the additions caused further confusion in the church. To his credit he sought to bring Arius back into the fold. He met the presbyter himself, encouraged him to sign an acceptable statement of beliefs and urged the new bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, to readmit him to the church. Athanasius refused, to the fury of Constantine, who banished him from his see and exiled him to Gaul. Constantine had little time for those who spurned compromise. The bishop of Constantine's new capital Constantinople had to be

asked to carry out the ceremony. He was about to comply but on the way to the ceremony Arius collapsed and died in a public latrine. His opponents saw this as the vengeance of God on a heretic. Still Constantine persisted in his rapprochement. It was none other than Eusebius of Nicomedia who, restored to his see, administered baptism to Constantine as he lay dying in 337, so much had Constantine reversed the theological stance of his own council.

The other canons of the Council of Nicaea show Constantine's concern to bring greater order to a church. Each area was confirmed as having a metropolitan bishop — in Rome, Alexandria, Carthage, or Antioch, for instance — to whom other bishops of the region were subservient. In Alexandria, Melitius' existing ordinations were accepted but he could make no more without the approval of Alexander. Bishops could not move from see to see. Once they had been appointed they had to stay where they were. A tolerant attitude was granted to those who had lapsed — even those who had sacrificed would be readmitted to the church after a period of exclusion followed by penance. Although the matter is only recorded in a letter of Constantine, there was also agreement that the date of Easter would be fixed according to the custom of Rome (where the date was decided with reference to the lunar calendar) rather than Asia. The Asians still tied the feast to the Jewish Passover, an interesting example of the continuing Christian links with Jewish tradition, with the result that Easter usually failed to fall on a Sunday. Constantine, in contrast, rejected a feast which was celebrated 'in accordance with the practice of the Jews ... Having sullied their own hands with a heinous crime [the death of Jesus], such men are, as one would expect, mentally blind.' His championing of Christianity, tolerant though it was at one level, was already resulting in the exclusion of other religious beliefs.

One of Constantine's first initiatives was to commemorate his success at the Milvian Bridge with a triumphal building. This was to mark his new commitment to Christianity and provide a suitable setting for the bishop of Rome. Sensitive as he had to be to the continuing vitality of pagan life in the ceremonial centre of Rome, his first church was built on imperial land at the southern edge of the city. The form of the church of Christ the Redeemer, now St John Lateran, was conventional, the basilica an all-purpose meeting hall which could be used for audiences or the administration of law. Its apse, traditionally highly decorated, had acted as the backdrop for emperors or magistrates and the *cathedra*, or ceremonial chair, of the

bishop was placed there, at the eastern end as was the custom for pagan buildings. The people of Rome would not have been offended by the building style itself, or even the opulence of its decoration, but they must have wondered what ceremonies went on there. An octagonal baptistery, still intact today, was placed alongside the basilica. Close by, in the remains of an imperial palace, Constantine's mother Helena had her own church (now Santa Croce in Gerusalemme). It was later to enshrine the *titulus*, the board hammered to the True Cross, which she had claimed to have unearthed on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The battered piece of wood is still on display although the legend that she found the cross itself is not recorded before 395.

It was on this pilgrimage that Helena had put in hand shrines in Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives, the traditional site of the ascension. Constantine had already shown great interest in the Holy Land. He had ordered the clearing of a site in Jerusalem where rumour suggested pagan buildings had been placed above the tomb of Christ. As if by a miracle a cave emerged from the debris. A vast church of the Holy Sepulchre, much praised by Eusebius who visited the Holy Land himself, was commissioned. It was probably the first time that a church had been surmounted by a cupola, a style that was soon to become pervasive with glittering examples in Antioch (the Golden Octagon initiated by Constantine himself before his death) and Constantinople (Santa Sophia, possibly Constantine's commission but not completed, in its first version, until 360).

Another initiative of Constantine involved building churches over the burials of martyrs. On the Vatican Hill in Rome, the presumed resting place of Peter had been honoured since the late second century and Constantine ordered a great basilica to be placed on the site, the first St Peter's, with transepts so that there was a large area around the shrine itself. This was another architectural innovation that was to become standard in large Christian churches. Other shrines outside the walls of Rome attributed to Constantine commemorate the burial places of St Lawrence and Sant' Agnese on the Via Nomentana. All these churches were given fine decoration in gold and mosaic, and sumptuous fittings.

Once, when he was asked about his relationship to the church, Constantine replied that he was a bishop for those outside the church, not for those already inside, and it is true that he usually kept his distance from the institution. The bishops attended him, not he their churches. They often offended him by their intransigence.

‘You, the bishops, do nothing but that which encourages discord and hatred and, to speak frankly, which leads to the destruction of the human race,’ was one remarkable outburst.

Constantine’s foundation of Constantinople maintained the distance. Although strategic considerations must have predominated in his choice of the small Greek city of Byzantium as his new eastern capital, the emperor showed little interest in creating a Christian city there. (Byzantium had no known Christian heritage and did not even provide a bishop for the council at Nicaea in 325). He followed Greek rituals when setting out the new foundations, brought in pagan statues from as far afield as Rome to line the streets (to the puzzlement of his biographer, Eusebius), while an image of himself alongside a figure of Tyche, the pagan goddess of chance, was paraded around the hippodrome on the inaugural day in 330. A statue of Constantine was given a halo as if he still conceived of himself as some sort of sun god. The temple of the protecting goddess Rhea remained in place and it was only gradually, after the emperor’s death, that she was transcended by a cult of the Virgin Mary. The first churches in Constantinople were dedicated to such spiritual abstractions as Wisdom (Santa Sophia), Peace (Sant’ Irene) and ‘the Holy Power’. There was a church dedicated to the Holy Apostles, the dedication marked by twelve symbolic tombs. However, Constantine announced that this would be his mausoleum and he would be buried there as the Thirteenth Apostle. The appropriation of this title bordered on blasphemy but was another reflection of the way in which Christianity was being transformed by his support.

These ambiguities of Constantine’s reign have made it difficult to assess his religious beliefs. Eusebius, in a panegyric of Constantine, delivered to the emperor in person in 336, describes him as ‘invested with a semblance of heavenly sovereignty ... He directs his gaze above, and frames his earthly government according to the pattern of that Divine original, feeling strength in its conformity to the monarchy of God.’ Constantine, Eusebius went on, was above all forms of emotion and desire, free of cruelty and any kind of base feeling. In truth, there is no evidence for any commitment from Constantine to building a heavenly kingdom on earth, still less for any personal piety. Constantine’s relationship with Christ will always remain unclear but it certainly did not temper his ambition to destroy his rivals or restrain the brutality with which he eliminated them. In many of his pronouncements,

Christ appears only as a symbol of order and unity, God's 'only begotten, pre-existent Word, the great High Priest of the mighty God, elder than all time and every age', as Eusebius put it. The human Jesus of the gospels is missing.

In fact, in his panegyric *Oration* of 336, Eusebius comes close to claiming that Constantine is the temporal equivalent of Christ. While Christ is 'the Preserver of the universe who orders these heavens and earth, and the celestial kingdom, consistently with his Father's will', Constantine fulfils the same role on earth. The reign sees the inauguration of the Byzantine concept of the Christian ruler, appointed as such by God. God's appreciation of his emperor is shown through the granting of military victory and the effective control of his territories: '... the only Conqueror among the Emperors of all time to remain Irresistible and Unconquered, Ever-conquering and always brilliant with triumphs over enemies, so Godbeloved and Thriceblessed, so truly pious and complete in happiness, that with utter ease he governed more nations than those before him, and kept his dominions unimpaired to the end'. Roman imperialism and Christianity have merged. The church gained enormously from the experience but the carpenter's son who had died as a rebel on the cross now risked being forgotten in the transformation of Christians from outsiders to insiders housed in rich buildings and tied in with the successes of the empire in war.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Debating the Nature of God

THE CHURCH DESPERATELY NEEDED NEW TALENT TO MEET THE MANY demands that Constantine had placed on it. The release of the clergy from the heavy burdens of local taxation and patronage meant that the class who most contributed these, the *curiales*, was now attracted to Christianity. Many of its members were used to administration, overseeing building projects and distributing the grain supplies to the poor and all these roles were increasing the preserve of the church. This was also a highly educated class. Philosophical argument was at the core of traditional education and converts from paganism now had a new set of intellectual challenges to engage them. The years between 312 and 381, when the emperor Theodosius imposed doctrinal uniformity on the empire, are fascinating for the way in which some of the finest minds of the period grappled with the problem posed by Nicaea, that is how to define the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son.

In traditional histories of the church, it was, and in some cases still is, taught that Nicaea had promulgated a creed which reflected ‘the truth’, even the established tradition of the church, and this was subverted by ‘Arian’ heretics until Nicaea was reasserted by the assembled bishops at the Council of Constantinople, called by Theodosius in 381. This view, which originated in the accounts of the winners in the debate, such as Athanasius and Jerome, will no longer do. Nicaea was a muddled formula, adopted in the heat of the moment to achieve the political purpose of isolating Arius and this was recognised, not least by Constantine, as soon as the dust had settled. The church historian Socrates, writing a century after Nicaea with access to documents now lost, had letters of the bishops before him in which they expressed their confusion over the term *homoousios*.

It was hard enough to make a philosophically coherent case for the pre-existence of Christ but even more difficult to say with any authority where this pre-existence might have begun. While there was a wealth of relevant New Testament texts, in the gospels, where Jesus talked about his relationship with the Father, and in the letters of Paul, where the apostle expressed his own thoughts, these were far too

varied to forge into any kind of coherent theology. The twenty-seven texts of the New Testament had not been selected for their compatibility on this question and everyone could find passages from scripture to support their views.

One of the reasons, in fact, that theological debate became so heated and incapable of resolution was that many of the issues involved had never been contemplated by any of the Old or New Testament writers and texts were distorted into meanings that were never intended. The chance that a single word from the scriptures would ever be able to encompass its complexity of a divine Father's relationship to his divine Son was remote. When a term such as *homoousios*, which was not even to be found in scripture, was imposed on the discussion, matters became even more convoluted. There would always be something artificial about the debates that followed. It was the historian Socrates who described the Nicene debates as 'like a battle fought at night, for neither party appeared to understand distinctly the grounds on which they calumniated one another'.

The theologians of the early church were all subordinationists, in that they believed Jesus was, in some way, subordinate to the Father. Subordinationism was strong because it had a mass of support from scripture, from the Old Testament, through the gospels and including the letters of Paul. It also fitted in well with Platonism, which now provided the philosophical backbone to Christian theology. Arius' conception of the Trinity, in which the Holy Spirit was subordinate to the Son who was, in his turn, subordinate to the Father echoed Plato's hierarchy of the Forms.

Those who still supported the Nicene creed of 325 faced a formidable rheological challenge as they could hardly renounce the terms *homoousios* and 'begotten' without rejecting the creed altogether, yet these two terms seemed to clash with each other. How could an entity of one substance beget another of the same substance without diminishing itself or, if not, proclaiming its superiority to the one begotten? Did not 'begetting' suggest that God was involved in some kind of sexual activity? Were not fathers always of higher status than their sons? These problems proved so intractable that, in the short term, the subordinationist mainstream resumed its flow. Yet the story of the next fifty years is one in which a counter-attack against the subordinationists, eventually supported by a determined emperor, Theodosius, led to the reassertion of Nicaea as the orthodox faith of the empire.

There were a number of smaller councils in the 340s and 350s and they were mostly representative of the subordinationist position. It was only in the Latin-speaking west that any sympathy was shown for a formula akin to Nicaea, one that talked of the equal majesty of Father and Son but the west was still isolated and Christianity much less popular there than it was in the Greek-speaking world.

One of the more impressive expressions of the mainstream subordinationist view is to be found in a creed drawn up by a small council of bishops at Sirmium (in the Balkans) in 357. The participating Greek-speaking bishops refused to endorse any formula relating to the creation of Jesus. 'It is clear that only the Father knows how he begot his Son, and the Son how he was begotten by the Father' was their sensible response. They were wise enough to recognise that this was an issue beyond human knowledge.

The bishops went on to reject the word *homoousios* on the grounds that it had never appeared in scripture. Instead, it seemed obvious to them that the Father was superior to Jesus. 'It cannot be doubted by anyone that the Father is greater in honour, in dignity, in glory, in majesty, in the very name of Father' and 'that the Son is subjected in common with all the things which the Father subjected to him'. One of the key points in the subordinationist position, reiterated in this creed, was that God could not suffer. If Jesus Christ was 'one in substance with the Father' then he would not be able to suffer either. So he had to be inferior to the Father at the very least in the capacity to suffer for mankind on the cross. The possibility of a valid salvation through his agonies could only be ensured if he was of a different, less elevated, substance than God the Father. This remained one of the strongest arguments against Nicaea. The creed of Sirmium was, in short, a coherent statement of subordinationist belief that appeared to be reconcilable with the scriptures and human salvation.

The compelling quality of subordinationism is well illustrated by the missionary journeys carried out by Ulfilas. Ulfilas was the son of Christian parents who had been captured by the Goths and he had been brought up among a Gothic tribe settled north of the Danube, the boundary of the empire. He spoke both Gothic (a now extinct Germanic language) and Greek and so was able to bridge the two cultures, his Greekness being sufficient for him to be consecrated as a bishop by Eusebius of Nicomedia (probably in 340-1). He then went off to work as a missionary among the Goths until he was driven back into the empire when one of the

Gothic kings began a persecution of Christians. Ulfilas now worked with Goths settled in the empire and he produced a Gothic translation of the Bible, remarkable in that he left out some of the most warlike texts of the Old Testament on the grounds that his congregations needed no further encouragement to be warriors! Ulfilas was a convinced subordinationist. In a creed attributed to him, he states that the Holy Spirit is 'but the minister of Christ ... subordinate in all things to the Son and the Son [is] subordinate and obedient in all things to his God and Father'. So all the converted Goths became subordinationists and remained so for centuries, long after the empire had turned back to Nicaea.

One reason for the success of subordinationism in the middle years of the fourth century was that all three of Constantine's sons, Constantine II, Constans and Constantius, were subordinationists. Their joint rule did not last long and by 351 Constantius had emerged as sole ruler of the empire. While he did not persecute pagans, Constantius wished to unite the Christians of his empire around a single subordinationist creed. He called on a group of bishops to advise him and they drew up the Dated Creed, so-called because the date, 22 May 359 in the western calendar, was inscribed on it. The creed, like that of Sirmium, renounced *homoousios*. Instead Jesus was described as 'the Son of God', distinct from Him but 'begotten before all ages', presumably therefore at some early point in the process of creation. The difficulties of having to explain how a Father and his begotten Son could exist eternally without a moment when the Son was unbegotten were thus avoided. The creed went on to describe how the Son had come down to earth to fulfil the will of his Father and then was taken up to heaven after his crucifixion to be seated at the right hand of the Father. As a replacement for *homoousios*, the creed declares that the acceptable terminology is that the Son is '*homoios* ['like'] the Father in all respects, as the Holy Scriptures also declare and teach'. There is a short statement of belief in the Holy Spirit but the Spirit is not included with Father and Son in a Trinity.

Constantius now called two councils of bishops in the hope that he would obtain the support of the church for the Dated Creed. One, of western bishops, some 400 strong, met at Ariminum in Italy, the other, with about 160 participants, met at Seleucia Isauria (in modern Turkey). Constantius was taken aback by the outcome. The bishops at Seleucia brought many of their personal antagonisms with them, quarrelled over every term in the creed and spent most days in divided sessions. The western bishops rejected the creed as deviating too far from Nicaea.

Constantius was forced into acting firmly. The councils were closed down, a further gathering of bishops was summoned to Constantinople and here, in 360, Constantius pushed through his Dated Creed. The subordinationist Homoian terminology had now received official recognition and one might assume that the Nicene creed was dead. However, any hopes that Constantius had of sustaining his own creed vanished when he died in 361 and was succeeded by his pagan nephew, Julian.

These debates are depressing in the conceptual nit-picking and personal antagonisms which they reveal. One can see why a term such as *homoios* was selected in the hope of gathering a consensus around it, but it was hopelessly vague and few could give it unequivocal support. One only had to ask in what specific ways the Son was 'like' the Father and in what ways he was not to launch an interminable debate. It was at the Seleucia council that one group suggested *homoiousios*, not 'of the same substance' but 'like in substance', to describe the relationship but this proved no more acceptable. The crucial point was that no single term would ever be adequate because there was no coherent experience or empirical evidence on which to base it. Constantius had shown that only the imposition of a formula from above would bring peace.

The very process of debate was challenged by Athanasius, the turbulent bishop of Alexandria who had refused Constantine's demand to readmit Arius to the church. Athanasius had been restored to his see in Alexandria in 346 and he presented himself as the champion of the embattled Nicene cause. He was not an intellectual and distrusted those who brought pagan philosophy into theology; their speculations were no more than 'fancies of human invention' as he put it in an episcopal letter of 352. Only the scriptures counted. Had not Christ commanded his disciples to call him alone their teacher (Matthew 23:8-10)? The path to truth lay in clearing one's mind of any sensual desire and then relying on faith in the words of Christ.

Athanasius provided a figurehead in the Egyptian monk Anthony who had lived for decades in the Egyptian desert. In Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, Anthony is presented as an unlettered man, a committed Nicene who rejects learning but who confounds philosophers by sheer force of personality whenever they come out to the desert to debate with him. The *Life of Anthony* circulated widely, inspiring many others, including Augustine. It is ironic that letters of the real

Anthony have been discovered which show that, in contrast to the fabricated anti-intellectual of Athanasius, he was well educated and able to write profoundly on asceticism.

Athanasius' theology was rooted in his personal horror at the sinfulness of humankind. So desperate was humanity's need for salvation, he claimed, that God had to present an emanation of Himself, as the Son, to ensure redemption. A created intermediary would never be up to this awesome task. So 'when we see the Son, we see the Father' (drawing on John 14:9). Athanasius strengthened his Nicene position by relying on those few texts which supported his own view, notably John 10:30, 'I and the Father are one', ignoring those which differed from it and castigating his opponents with sweeping polemic.

While in his early works Athanasius used only terms from scripture to describe the relationship between Father and Son, eventually, in the tract *De decretis* written in 356 or 357, he revived the term *homoousios*. The catalyst appears to have been another sentence of exile, this time at the hands of Constantius who had been urged by subordinationist bishops to replace such a prominent opponent. (Athanasius took refuge in the Egyptian desert.) Athanasius now grasped that he would clarify his position and rally what support he had if he unashamedly returned to the Nicene formula. He made one important advance on Nicaea. He recognised that the status of the Holy Spirit had been left unacknowledged in the Nicene creed and he insisted that it must be given some form of higher status alongside Father and Son.

Athanasius' position was strengthened in two ways. The first was his continuing contact with the bishops he had met during his first exile in the west. We are handicapped by our lack of knowledge of western theology in this period. In the eyes of Greek contemporaries, it did not amount to much: 'You will not find that any one of the western nations have any great inclination for philosophy or geometry or studies of that sort', was the dismissive comment of the Emperor Julian on the matter and many Greeks argued that Latin did not have sufficient subtlety as a language to deal with theological issues. One recent exhaustive study of the Nicene disputes has to admit that 'our knowledge of Latin Christology and Trinitarian theology in the west between 250 and 360 is extremely limited and certainly not such that we can make certain judgements about its overall character'.

What fragmentary evidence survives suggests that the western bishops did believe in a Trinity in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit co-existed in some form of a single Godhead. This could be equated with Athanasius' Nicene theology. The most sophisticated attempt by a Latin theologian to go further was made by Hilary, bishop of Poitiers. Hilary is a rare example of a westerner who understood enough Greek to read Athanasius in the original. He created a Latin terminology for a Nicene Trinity that was persuasive enough to attract a group of western bishops who were sympathetic to Nicaea. In the 370s they were to receive a formidable boost from the support of Ambrose of Milan, the dominant figure in the western church in the late fourth century.

Secondly, Athanasius realised that the best form of defence was attack. If one argued for the primacy of scripture over philosophy, then the subordinationists held the advantage through the mass of texts that supported their position. Paradoxically Athanasius, who claimed to put scripture before philosophy, was acutely vulnerable if the debate was rooted in the scriptures. So he hit on the device of classifying all subordinationists as followers of Arius and then lambasting all as heretics. Tract after tract followed against the Arians. Here Athanasius was at his most unscrupulous. Anyone who opposed him on political or religious grounds was declared to be an Arian. The devil was said to have inspired the Arians' use of scripture. The Arians were so wicked that they could only be compared to the Hydra, the monster whose severed head spawned a hundred others. They were no better than Jews or corrupted by the philosophy of the pagans. The cumulative effect of this invective was so great that the dispute became known as the Arian controversy, even though Arius had been only one representative of the subordinationist tradition. It did nothing to raise Athanasius' reputation as a theologian among his contemporaries. This was power politics not philosophical debate.

Meanwhile, the empire was undergoing dramatic change and disruption. Julian, who succeeded Constantius in 361, had been born a Christian but the squabbling over doctrine repelled him. The historian Ammianus Marcellinus tells us that he believed that Christian infighting was so bitter that the religion would simply destroy itself. He returned to the old gods. In his *Contra Galilaeos* ('Against the Galileans') Julian used his considerable knowledge of the scriptures to highlight their contradictions. Why is there no recognition in the synoptic gospels of Jesus' divinity, for instance? The use of Old Testament prophecies as harbingers of Christ is arbitrary and unjustified. Why did God create Eve if he knew that she

would thwart his plans for creation? Within this critique, Julian made a sophisticated plea for religious toleration, on the grounds that each culture needed to define the supreme divinity in its own way.

Julian withdrew the right of Christians to teach outside their churches and revived a variety of pagan cults but it is unlikely that he would ever have displaced the church. His own philosophy was too intellectual and an exuberant polytheism was too amorphous to have created an effective anti-Christian force. In any case Julian was killed while campaigning against the Persians in 363 and his successor, a staff officer Jovian who was acclaimed by the army, was a Christian. Jovian himself did not last long — he died only eight months into his reign after he had been forced to make a humiliating surrender of territory to the Persian empire — yet Christianity was restored to its position as the favoured religion of the empire and all future emperors were to be Christian.

There survives an important oration made before Jovian by a pagan orator, Themistius. Themistius had two concerns, the fear that a restored Christianity would lead to a backlash against pagans and a deep anxiety that Christian infighting was undermining the stability of the empire. He pleaded for mutual tolerance. Themistius stressed the impossibility of anyone, an emperor included, controlling the human soul. Persecution of the body could never destroy the freedom that was intrinsic to its identity. Instead God had implanted ‘a favourable disposition to piety’ in human minds but had left each to follow its own path. God actually enjoyed being worshipped in a number of ways, a positive appreciation of the tolerance of God that later disappeared from western thought. In any case, Themistius went on, a society was only healthy if it allowed free competition between individuals and ideas.

This freedom to debate was honoured by the emperors who succeeded Jovian: a tough army general Valentinian I, who ruled over the western empire between 364 and 375, and his brother Valens who assumed responsibility for the east. Valentinian was reputed to be Nicene in his sympathies but he refused to impose his views on the church so long as individual bishops kept good order. When bishops did ask him for support, he simply told them that it was none of his business how the church was run. Valens was more openly partisan — in his case towards the Homoian, Christ as ‘like’ the Father, creed imposed by Constantius in 360. However, he recognised that any arbitrary suppression of Nicene bishops

was likely to be counter-productive. He tolerated the ageing Athanasius, removing him briefly in 365 but then allowing him to return to his see for his final years (Athanasius died in 373). Effective Nicene bishops such as Basil of Caesarea (the capital of Cappadocia) were left in place.

This meant that discussion could flourish. In view of what was to follow in the 380s these years were the swansong of creative theology in the ancient world. The three most famous theologians of the period are the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea and Basil's brother, Gregory of Nyssa. Their achievement lay in their ability to use Greek philosophy to develop a terminology within which a Nicene Trinity could be expressed. While Athanasius might have led the onslaught against subordinationism, the Cappadocian Fathers gave the Nicene cause intellectual respectability.

All three were steeped in pagan philosophy. Basil even wrote a tract urging all Christians to master pagan texts before they embarked on the study of the scriptures. To grasp some idea of their learning one can spot the allusions to classical literature in the works of Gregory of Nazianzus. From Homer, in the eighth century BC, through to Plutarch, in the second century AD, almost every major author, including the historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides, the poets, the philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and the playwrights are represented. Gregory has read deeply in Philo and Origen as well as the scriptures. When one reads Gregory's *Theological Orations* of 380 one is also struck by his range and consummate use of analogy. He meditates on the human mind, ranging over the problems of communication between parent and child, the transmission of sound from one mind to another, how the mind can be simultaneously self-reflective and imaginative enough to tour the universe. He speculates on the process of human growth within the womb, how first the soul becomes established in the body, then the intellect becomes part of the soul and finally the ability to reason becomes attached to the intellect.

The Cappadocians showed great respect for Athanasius as a battering ram for the Nicene cause even if they could not warm to his writings. They could hardly approve of his open rejection of the pagan philosophy that they so enjoyed. It is not clear where their acceptance of Nicaea originated but the catalyst may have been a confrontation between Basil and Eunomius, one of the most interesting Christian intellectuals of the period. Eunomius, the son of a poor farmer from

Cappadocia, prided himself on his use of reason and the precision with which he analysed issues. His conclusions were shocking to many. Eunomius argued that even the nature of the Godhead could be understood through reason and it was impossible to conceive of the substance of God being shared in any way with any other entity. So Eunomius rejected the Nicene formula completely and instead emphasised the radical differences between the Father and the Son. He highlighted the obedience of the Son, who was ‘the perfect agent for all the creative activity and decisions of the Father’. Among these creations was the Holy Spirit who was thus at the head of the created order in the material world. In 360 Eunomius and his followers had been condemned by Constantius. They had positioned themselves well outside his formula of *homoios*. However, undaunted by imperial disfavour, they set up their own groups of bishops in a sweep of dioceses from Constantinople to Libya.

Basil is known to have debated with the Eunomians in 359 and in the mid-360s he wrote a number of tracts *Contra Eunomium*. It was as if their radicalism pushed him towards Nicaea. Furthermore, Basil was concerned in particular to bring the Holy Spirit into the Godhead and, in contrast to the Eunomians, in some form of equality with Father and Son. His most enduring work is his *On the Holy Spirit* of 375, a much more sophisticated work than that of Athanasius — its terminology reappears in the revised version of the Nicene creed which the bishops drew up at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Basil argues that the gift of the Spirit can only be received through rejecting the passions of the flesh and that the Spirit will bring ‘enlightenment which enables the recipient to discover the truth’.

The major achievement of the Cappadocians was to define how each distinct *hypostasis*, personality, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, could exist within the single Godhead. They had the intellectual advantage over Athanasius in that they were able to draw without inhibition from pagan philosophy. Much of their terminology seems to derive, for instance, from the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus, the greatest spiritual mind of the third century and among the finest philosophers of the classical world. Plotinus had also posited three divine entities, ‘the One’, an all-pervading ‘Intellect’, which conveys the Platonic Forms to the material world, and a ‘World-Soul’. They shared a common substance, yet each had a distinct role, and here again Plotinus used the word *hypostasis*. So he provided a pagan framework

that could be incorporated into Christianity. Yet the only way in which any one formula could be declared as supreme above the others was by imposition from above.

By 380, Constantinople was a predominantly Christian city and it had gained a reputation for buzzing with theological discussion. When Gregory of Nyssa visited in 381 he found that even the bath attendants were discussing the relationship of Father to Son. It is important to capture this moment, the last in the empire's history when different Christian traditions were free to express themselves.

The majority of the Christian population was still Homoian subordinationist, led by the bishop of the city, Demophilus, who had taken office in 370. The Homoians still distinguished themselves from the Eunomians but, twenty years on from his rejection by Constantius and undaunted by the attacks on his theology by Basil and others, Eunomius was still full of energy. In 380, in fact, he is known to have been preaching to enthusiastic crowds at Chalcedon just across the Bosphorus from Constantinople. His so-called *Second Apology* survives from these years as does a statement of his views made for the emperor Theodosius in 383.

In these Eunomius ruthlessly analyses the division between Father and Son, stressing again the impossibility of anything of the Father's substance being passed on to the Son. Eunomius may have irritated everyone by the relentlessness of his logic (he was taunted by his enemies for having Aristotle as his bishop!) but he played a vital part in helping to clarify the issues, especially by exposing the vagueness of the term *homoios*. He certainly had a point. There are no less than twelve known Homoian creeds, including one by the missionary Ulfilas. Gregory of Nazianzus remarked that '*homoios* was a figure seeming to look in the direction of all who passed by, a boot fitting either foot, a winnowing with every wind'.

While Eunomius was expounding his views in Chalcedon, a small congregation of Nicene believers, drawn mainly from the administrative elite of Constantinople, was receiving a series of high-level orations from Gregory of Nazianzus who had been appointed their priest. The five so-called *Theological Orations* are the fullest and most coherent statement of Nicene orthodoxy. Gregory starts by explaining that only those who have reflected deeply on theology can expound it — a rebuke to the chattering bath attendants and others who were debating the issues on the

streets. He proceeds by talking each major issue through, often courageously so by quoting the subordinationist case through its scriptures and attempting to refute each text. He admits that there are weaknesses in the Nicene case: he struggles, as did every Nicene, with the problem of how a Jesus 'one in substance with the Father' could suffer and he has to confess that there is no agreement on the nature of the Holy Spirit. His attempts to deal with the verses from the gospels that talk of Jesus' inferiority to the Father are not always convincing. Even so the orations remain a *tour de force* and were recognised as such for generations to come.

Yet as the debates continued in Constantinople, a shadow hovered over the city. In January 380 a new emperor of the east, a Spanish general named Theodosius, had issued an edict, not a law as such but a statement of his intent, from Thessalonika. Directed specifically at the people of his capital it announced that henceforth they must believe in a single deity 'of the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity'. Any other belief was 'demented and insane' and would incur both the wrath of God and the secular punishment of the emperor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Stifling of Christian Diversity

THEODOSIUS' ROOTS WERE IN THE CHRISTIAN ARISTOCRACY OF SPAIN. He had been appointed emperor of the east in 379 at a moment of great crisis. Valentinian, probably the last Roman emperor to be able to mount effective assaults on the barbarian tribes, had died in 375. His successor in the western empire, his son Gratian, was only sixteen. Valentinian's brother, Valens, still ruled over the eastern empire but in 378 he was killed in a devastating defeat at Adrianople by an army of Goths. The victorious Gothic bands were never strong enough to take any major cities but they had humiliated the empire and they now disrupted much of its administrative framework in the Balkans as they plundered the countryside. It was at this desperate moment that Gratian appointed Theodosius, who had already proved himself as a successful general while in his twenties, as Valens' successor.

Theodosius was still not baptised in 379 but he had an austere faith and had absorbed, as his edict suggested, belief in a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost of equal majesty. When he arrived at Thessalonika in 380 to lead the counter-attack against the Goths, he was baptised by the city's bishop Acholius, who was firmly committed to Nicaea. As a Latin speaker, Theodosius probably knew little of the rich tradition of theological debate in the east, but he believed in bringing his new Christian subjects more fully under state control. The edict from Thessalonika was the first intimation of the new policy.

Theodosius approached the challenge of imposing uniformity of belief astutely. He announced the outlines of his 'creed' and promulgated it as a law before he sought the comments of the bishops. This was to be a political rather than theological coup. So, as soon as he had entered his capital, Constantinople, for the first time, in November 380, he summoned Bishop Demophilus and asked him to renounce his Homoian beliefs in favour of the formula of 'equal majesty'. To his credit, Demophilus refused. He was deposed and Theodosius turned to Gregory of Nazianzus whose *Theological Orations* were compatible with the emperor's own beliefs. Even though his 'Nicene' congregation made up only a small minority of the city's Christian population, Gregory was astonished to find himself the new

bishop. To ensure his safety from the Homoian masses, troops had to line the streets and even take up guard inside the Church of the Holy Apostles where his enthronement took place.

Theodosius now moved to impose his faith across the eastern empire. In a surviving *epistula*, a formal letter imposing a law, issued to the prefect of Illyricum in January 381, Theodosius insisted that only those who affirmed ‘the faith of Nicaea’ could now be appointed bishops. The details of what this meant were left somewhat vague in the letter. Father and Son had to be accepted as ‘under one name’ but there was no specific mention of *homoousios*. The Holy Spirit was given no special status — it was simply stated that ‘it should not be violated by being denied’. However, there were sweeping condemnations of ‘the poison of the Arian sacrilege’ and ‘the crime of the Eunomian heresy’.

There was no mercy shown to those who were now classified as ‘insane and demented heretics’. They had to surrender their churches to those clergy who came within Theodosius’ definition, lose any tax exemptions they had and they could not build replacement churches within the city walls. Any open protest was to be met with expulsion of the dissenters from the city. A few months later, even the building of churches outside the walls was forbidden. There is a record from some years later of the resolute Demophilus still conducting open-air services for his expelled Homoian congregation. It is not known whether similar laws were issued to the prefects of other parts of the east but the letter to Illyricum concluded with a declaration of its aim ‘that the whole world might be restored to orthodox bishops who hold the Nicene faith’ and there are records of expulsions of Homoians in provinces outside Illyricum.

With the law now in place, Theodosius summoned to Constantinople a council of bishops who were known to be committed to Nicaea to endorse it. These had already made themselves known at an assembly held in Antioch by Meletius, the city’s Nicene bishop, in 379, but it was a limited group. There were no bishops recorded from Illyricum or Egypt and the representatives from western Asia were followers of one Macedonius whose loyalty to the Nicene creed was such that they would not accept the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Nicene creed asked no more than to ‘believe in the Holy Spirit’ and the ‘Macedonians’ clung rigidly to this limited phrase. Any attempt to revise the creed so as to give the Holy Spirit equality with Father and Son was bound to offend them.

The council began with a setback. Meletius died soon after his arrival. Not only had the council lost an apparently efficient and charismatic president, but a dispute immediately broke out as to who should be his successor as bishop of Antioch. This might have been resolved if the presidency of the council had not been taken over by the newly appointed bishop of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus. Gregory may have been a consummate theologian but he was hopelessly out of his depth in a leadership role. He endorsed an unpopular candidate, one Paulinus, as Meletius' replacement in Antioch, refused to back down when defeated and instead berated the council for not backing his personal interpretation of the Nicene formula which insisted that the Holy Spirit be given an elevated status as 'one in substance' with Father and Son. He resigned, leaving a bitter description of his fellow bishops as 'a mob of wild young men'. A walkout of the 'Macedonians' followed. Gregory, accused by his opponents, who had been strengthened by the arrival of some bishops from Egypt, of occupying his see unlawfully, in that he was still bishop of the remote Cappadocian town of Sasima, resigned the bishopric of Constantinople. It was now that he wrote that he had never attended a church council which 'produced deliverance from evils rather than the addition to them ... rivalries and manoeuvres always prevail over reason'.

Theodosius must have been taken aback by the uproar. He was, however, a pragmatic ruler. He seized the initiative by appointing a senator, Nectarius, as the council's new president. Nectarius was popular within the city and the bishops appear to have accepted him although he was only a catechumen and not yet baptised. It paid to have some form of bulwark against the dispossessed Homoians whose discontent must have been obvious to the visiting bishops. He was soon baptised and consecrated bishop of Constantinople. His theological deficiencies were remedied by instructing him in the Nicene faith. Theodosius now drove home his advantage. Constantinople was declared the second bishopric of the empire after Rome. It was an astonishing move but his policy was to link the ecclesiastical administration to the political and Constantinople deserved precedence as 'the second Rome'. The two most powerful bishoprics of the east could do little to stop him. Antioch was still vacant and the bishop of Alexandria, Timothy, had only just been installed. To keep them in their place, it was declared that no bishop could meddle in affairs outside his diocese. This was essentially a political coup against the church — Constantine would have approved.

At some point before the council was dissolved in July 381, it issued a revised version of the Nicene creed. The episode is shrouded in mystery because the new creed is only known from a declaration at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 when it was accredited to the council of 381. It is the version that is used today with the Holy Spirit elevated as 'the Lord and Life-giver'. There is no specific mention of the Trinity and certainly none of the consubstantiality of the Holy Spirit. As suggested earlier, the words appear drawn from Basil's *On the Holy Spirit*, although Basil himself had died in 379. There is no sign of any acknowledgement of Athanasius. It is probable that the creed could never have been promulgated in Constantinople while the council was in session because of the continuing hostility to Nicaea from the local population.

The creed which was passed at Constantinople in 381 runs as follows:

We believe in one God Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and all things, seen and unseen;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten by his Father before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial [*homoousios*] with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens and became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became a man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate and suffered and was buried and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures and ascended into the heavens and is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again to judge the living and the dead, and there will be no end to his kingdom;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son, who spoke by the prophets;

And in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church;

We confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins;

We wait for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the coming age, Amen.

The anathemas against Arius have been dropped in this version and the Holy Spirit given a higher status, although there is no mention of a Trinity in which it is a consubstantial member. Those who preach 'one baptism' have won out over those who believe in rebaptism, and the resurrection of the dead is now accepted. Note also the insistence that there is a single catholic (in this context 'universal') church based on the apostolic succession.

With the conclusion of the council, Theodosius issued a new set of *epistulae* to his civil servants asking them to impose the new faith. Again this was defined somewhat vaguely, as belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one in majesty, power, glory, splendour and divinity. Some distinction between the three was maintained by acknowledging each as a *persona* (all imperial laws were issued in Latin and this was the closest equivalent to the Greek *hypostasis*). Theodosius had learned the lesson that any attempt to use a more precise terminology was likely to be thwarted by renewed debate and instead he nominated bishops for each diocese who would issue certificates of orthodoxy to their clergy without which they could not be promoted to bishoprics. It was a neat way of distancing himself from further wrangling.

Not surprisingly disorder broke out as the new laws were enforced. The church had built up so much wealth and enjoyed so many privileges that expelling the 'Arians' from their churches was explosive. One pro-Nicene historian, writing in the next century, talks of '[Arian] wolves harrying the flocks up and down the glades, daring to hold rival assemblies, stirring sedition among the people, and shrinking from nothing which can do damage to the churches'. The unrest was so extensive that Theodosius wavered. In 383 he called another, smaller council, perhaps more remarkable than the selective assembly of 381 in that he asked representatives of all the main schools to attend. There was Nectarius, of course, in his new role as bishop of Constantinople, Demophilus and even Eunomius himself. The Macedonians sent one of their bishops. The emperor asked each leader to provide a statement of his own beliefs. He hoped that some kind of consensus could be reached by comparing them. Once again, however, the discussions became acrimonious. The historian Sozomen records that the laity present were infuriated by the way the bickering between bishops discredited them before the emperor. Losing patience, Theodosius announced that he would accept only

the creed of Nectarius (which had been drawn up for the former pagan by Nicene theologians) and that all other views were heretical. He issued a new set of laws against heretics.

Theodosius can hardly be blamed for his attempt to bring the empire into some kind of order and he doubtless felt that he was justified in doing this through the imposition of his Christian faith. He had the coercive power to do so and ultimately the church had no means of opposing his will. In effect, Theodosius had backed one faction, the Nicene, and isolated the rest. There was no way that those excluded, Eunomians and Homoians, could combine against him. By offering the wealth of the church to the victors, he was cementing his laws within a bedrock of privilege and patronage. The incentives for conformity were powerful.

Why did the emperor chose to support a Trinity of equal majesty rather than a subordinationist alternative? Certainly Theodosius represented the beliefs of his fellow aristocratic Christians in Spain and probably much of the western empire. The former provincial governor, Ambrose, now bishop of Milan, was ardent in the Nicene cause. Yet there were deeper ideological reasons why this class was so sympathetic to a Godhead in which Jesus was elevated into the divinity. The problem for anyone, emperor, senior administrator or aristocratic landowner, who was concerned with upholding the hierarchical structure of the empire, was that the Jesus of the gospels was a rebel against the empire and had been executed by one of its provincial governors. He had preached the immediate coming of the kingdom in which the poor would inherit the earth, hardly what the elite wished to hear at a time of intense danger. There was an incentive to shift the emphasis from the gospels to the divine Jesus, as pre-existent to the Incarnation and of high status 'at the right hand of the Father'. One can see the shift in Eusebius' description of Christ in his *Oration to Constantine*, 'the great High Priest of the mighty God', quoted earlier. The Jesus of the gospels had again been ignored.

One of the most extraordinary manifestations of this elevation of Christ is to be found in *De fide*, a defence of the Nicene faith written by Ambrose, bishop of Milan. In *De fide* Ambrose equates victory in war with acceptance of the Nicene creed and points out that the Homoians are always losing battles because they insult God through their heresy — an argument which was to be extended by later Nicene historians to provide an explanation for the Homoian Valens' defeat at Adrianople. Remarkably, Ambrose announces that Christ is the 'leader of the

legions', a bizarre distortion of the historical reality but one that reflects the imperial ideology within which the church now operated. By 390, in the church of San Pudenziana in Rome, Christ is shown 'in majesty' as an imperial magistrate. The equation between Nicene orthodoxy and the administrative classes can be supported by details of the only independent Nicene congregation recorded — that ministered to by Gregory of Nazianzus in Constantinople and made up largely of civil servants and the city's elite.

The imposition of the Nicene creed was motivated as much by politics as theology. Imposed through imperial law, accepted by a council presided over by a hastily converted senator, it was the theological formula which most fully met the needs of the empire for an ideology of good order under the auspices of God. Yet histories of Christian doctrine still talk of the Nicene solution as if it had floated down from heaven and had been recognised by the bishops as the only possible formula to describe the three members of the Trinity. In reality, Theodosius brought the belief from his native Spain to the eastern empire where the matter was still unresolved and then imposed it by law before calling a hand-picked council on the matter. One result of this was that the church was unable to provide reasoned support for the Nicene Trinity and it is still referred to in the Roman Catholic catechism as a mystery of faith, a revelation of God 'that is inaccessible to reason alone'. Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers became the bulwarks of orthodoxy, their opponents denounced as heretical. Only recently has Theodosius' considerable role in settling the great theological debates been recognised.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Divine but Human

WHILE AUGUSTINE WAS WRITING AND PREACHING IN NORTHERN AFRICA, events were moving fast in the eastern empire. On the death of Theodosius I in 395, the empire was split between his two young sons, Honorius in the west and Arcadius in the east. Power sharing between emperors had become common since the time of Diocletian but now the division into western and eastern empires became permanent. The fates of the two halves were to be very different. The western empire collapsed while, in one of the most remarkable survival stories in world history, the 'Romans', as the Greeks now called themselves, sustained the Byzantine empire until it was finally overthrown by the Ottoman Turks in 1453. They did this despite blow after blow from their surrounding enemies, including the Persians and the forces of Islam which overran much of the southern half of the empire in the seventh century. The Byzantine empire used to be seen as stagnant and exotic, introspective and consumed by court intrigues, but its capacity to adapt its administration and defence towards new threats was extraordinary.

So far as the eastern church was concerned, however, Theodosius' coup of the 380s had left many issues unresolved. The boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy had only been tentatively defined and it was impossible to find a way of clarifying them. The 'Arians' survived in Constantinople and in one riot had even burned down the church of Santa Sophia. Paganism had been confronted in the 390s but could not easily be eradicated, especially in the rural areas where it showed a tenacity rooted in centuries of custom. Assaults on paganism also meant challenging the major philosophies and education system that between them had upheld and fostered rational debate and high-quality rhetoric for centuries. Within the Nicene church itself, the new supremacy of the bishop of Constantinople, second only to Rome, had caused enormous resentment in Alexandria. It was still uncertain whether the emperors were ready to use their power and influence to impose religious uniformity as Theodosius I had done.

However, Arcadius showed none of the resilience and political intelligence of his father. Nectarius had been a shrewd appointment as bishop of Constantinople in 381 and remained in his post until 397. His successor, John Chrysostom, the 'Golden-mouthed' preacher of Antioch, on the other hand, was the choice of the imperial eunuch Eutropius. John was prickly in temperament, hopelessly anti-social and reckless in asserting his authority. While he denounced the rich for their profligacy, he believed that a bishop should enjoy precedence, even in the imperial palace. At first Eudoxia, the pious wife of Arcadius, welcomed him for his asceticism, but she and the other members of the Constantinople elite were soon unsettled by his outspoken attacks on their finery. Only the poor, who relished John's vivid attacks on the extravagance of the rich, supported him but such a volatile group was to prove impossible to control.

As John's popularity waned, it was inevitable that Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, a city still smarting from the elevation of Constantinople in 381, would watch for an opportunity to discredit him. At first things did not look hopeful for Theophilus. His destruction of the Serapeion in 391 had unsettled the emperors. He had now decided to join the campaign against Origen and he exiled a group of Origenist monks. These, led by four Tall or Long Brothers, as they became known, arrived in Constantinople to complain of their treatment. Eudoxia and Arcadius demanded that Theophilus come to Constantinople to explain himself and John was ordered by the court to preside at the interrogation. A confrontation between the bishops, one technically superior to the other who did not recognise his status, seemed inevitable.

Theophilus could hardly defy the imperial summons but he took the longest route possible to the capital, overland through Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor, canvassing for support among other bishops as he did so. His retinue arrived in Constantinople a year after the summons with a mass of hangers-on, including bishops from Asia whom John had deposed for corruption. Once they had settled outside the city, they began gathering grievances against John who did nothing to help himself by refusing to preside over the coming tribunal. In desperation the court abandoned him, and Theophilus, with the support of Eudoxia, arrogantly pronounced his deposition. In June 404 John left Constantinople. He returned briefly but died in exile in 407.

John's unhappy experience shows that the relationship between church and the emperors was still undefined. It depended on the personalities involved and the degree to which they were prepared to manoeuvre, with or without scruples, to achieve their ends. In theory, the court held all the coercive power and could use it, as Theodosius had done, to impose its will on the church. In practice, the weakness of Arcadius, the impulsiveness of Eudoxia and John's self-created isolation, had allowed Theophilus to snatch a temporary victory from what appeared to be a hopelessly weak position. There were to be longterm repercussions. Theophilus included his nephew, Cyril in his retinue, and when Theophilus died in 412, Cyril, as has been seen, came triumphantly and violently into his own. He had no inhibitions about confronting a bishop of Constantinople as ruthlessly as his uncle had done.

Arcadius died in 408. His son, Theodosius II, who survived until 450, achieving the longest rule of any emperor, saw it as his duty to defend orthodoxy. This was not easy. The boundaries were never clear. One of Theodosius' laws, of 428, listed over twenty heretical sects, including Arians, 'Macedonians' and Manicheists. Furthermore, the wealth of the church was such that rival groups would taunt each other with accusations of heresy in the hope of dislodging their opponents. Heresy and orthodoxy became very flexible concepts. One unfortunate bishop of Synnada (in Phrygia) travelled to Constantinople to complain of 'heretics' in his diocese only for these to declare that they were now 'orthodox' and justified in seizing control of the diocese in his absence. They were never expelled.

Pagans continued to be targeted. In 435 orders were given for all pagan shrines still standing to be destroyed and three years later Theodosius [II] commanded the praetorian prefect of the east to 'exercise watchfulness over the pagans and their heathen enormities' as 'despite a thousand terrors of the laws' they continued to sin 'with audacious madness'. In the same year, 438, a law deprived Jews of all 'honours and dignities' and banned them from any administrative role, even those involving the defence of a city.

These laws were comparatively ineffective. Synagogues continued to be built and paganism was still strong in the countryside well into the sixth century. The most important reason for the lack of imperial success was a fresh debate which consumed the energies and ambitions of the leading bishops. One result of the elevation of Jesus into the Godhead was to leave it unclear how his humanity,

as described in the gospels, could be related to his new divine status. The Nicene creed simply stated that 'he became a man' but provided no further enlightenment. How had he shown his continuing divinity while on earth? One might suggest his miracles, the special nature of his teachings, the inability to sin and the resurrection, yet what room did this leave for his humanity? Did he switch from being divine to human at will or did two natures co-exist at all times? Did Jesus have emotions or did he transcend them? Were they 'real' emotions or only designed to ensure effective contact with his followers? Could he suffer pain? If he could, then was he really a god? If not, what was the point of the crucifixion?

No two theologians were likely to agree on a single precise formula to describe the relationship between the two natures and so the issue became caught up in the existing rivalry between Constantinople and Alexandria. In 428 a new bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, had taken office. Like John Chrysostom he was socially clumsy, offending Pulcheria, the emperor's pious elder sister, by refusing to allow her to come up to communion with the emperor and pointing out an apparent contradiction between her assertive presence in public life and her professed virginity. He annoyed others by vigorously asserting his authority over the eastern church. On the issue of Jesus' humanity, he followed the tradition of Antioch, which taught that as Mary was fully human, she could not have given birth to someone who was fully God. Jesus must be accorded a human nature of some sort although it was unclear how this related to his undoubted divinity.

This view was now threatened by the increasing veneration shown for the Virgin Mary. A new title for her had been proposed, perhaps as early as Origen, that of Mary as *Theotokos*, 'the bearer of God'. The title did not offend Nicaea but it assumed that the primary nature of Jesus was divine. Naturally, the supporters of *Theotokos* accepted that Jesus had some human elements but placed these somewhere within a single divine nature. This approach was more popular in Alexandria. When Nestorius unwisely preached his own views, which included the title of 'bearer of Christ', rather than 'bearer of God', for Mary, Cyril, now bishop of Alexandria, saw his chance to challenge him. Cyril accused Nestorius of asserting that Christ had two natures, and issued a list of 'Twelve Anathemas', his own version of Nestorius' apparent 'heresies', including the denial of Mary as *Theotokos*, which he called on Nestorius to renounce. He then sent a distorted version of Nestorius' views to the bishop of Rome, Celestine, who was only too happy to join in a campaign against a bishop of Constantinople.

The concept of a single or a divided nature of Christ was a purely artificial one. It could never be related to any text from the gospels although it could perhaps be argued that the synoptics favoured the Nestorian position and the gospel of John the Alexandrian. This, of course, helped no one as it was impossible to propose that one gospel contained more theological truth than another. It was an issue that could be recognised as insoluble or, if the debate became too fractious, as one to be settled by imperial decree. Theodosius [II] failed to appreciate this. As a result the church was torn apart by bitter argument for the next twenty years and when Theodosius' successor Marcion did finally intervene to impose a solution it led to a major split within eastern Christianity.

The first attempt to settle the issue was a stage-managed council in Ephesus that Cyril persuaded Theodosius [II] to endorse. It met in July 431. It was an astute choice of venue because of the legend that Mary had come here with the apostle John after the crucifixion and here as much as anywhere she was venerated as *Theotokos*. There was no easier way of isolating Nestorius and when he arrived from Constantinople, he was barred from the council where Cyril and his followers declared him a Judas. His supporters were outraged. Theodosius [II] realised he had lost the initiative and vainly tried to excommunicate the major participants on both sides of the controversy.

Cyril knew how to respond. He scoured Egypt for gifts, and an impressive array of gold coins and exotic items including ostrich eggs was shipped from Alexandria to Constantinople for distribution around the court in the hope winning the emperor's support. It had some effect. Theodosius [II] understood that it would be impossible for Nestorius to remain as bishop of Constantinople and he was sent off to a monastery in Antioch. Before he went he announced that he would accept *Theotokos* so long as the term could be interpreted in a way he could support. Officially he had escaped the stigma of heresy. Cyril was allowed to retain his bishopric.

Cyril also showed that he was ready to compromise. Secure now that his rival in Constantinople had been deposed, he accepted a formula which retained *Theotokos* but which talked of two natures in union, Christ as both perfect god and perfect man with the latter 'one in substance' with the rest of humanity. This satisfied no one. Many of Cyril's supporters felt that any talk of a two-nature Christ was a concession to Nestorius and a declaration by Theodosius [II] in 435

that Nestorius was indeed a heretic was not enough to calm them. When Cyril died in 444, he was succeeded as bishop of Alexandria by Dioscorus, a hardliner who wanted to discard Cyril's compromise and return to a one (divine) nature formula. Dioscorus launched his own assault on the new bishop of Constantinople, Flavian, and once again Theodosius [II] was induced to summon a council to Ephesus.

The triumphant Dioscorus called on Leo I, bishop of Rome, 440-61, to support him by coming to Ephesus. It was to his credit that Leo avoided getting drawn into the political and theological quagmire and he refused. Leo was not a creative theologian but he had a clear and vigorous mind and saw his chance to draw up a statement of what he understood was western belief on the matter of Christ's humanity. To the horror of Dioscorus, it was not far from that Nestorius. Leo's Tome (the term for an official papal letter) set out a Christ in whom divine and human natures co-exist. Each has its own sphere of activity but these operate without becoming separate. 'He who is true God is also true man: and in this union there is no lie, since the humility of manhood and the loftiness of the Godhead both meet there. For as God is not changed by the showing of pity, so man is not swallowed up by the dignity. For each form does what is proper to it with the co-operation of the other; that is the Word performing what appertains to the Word, and the flesh carrying out what appertains to the flesh. One them sparkles with miracles, the other succumbs to injuries.' This description — it can hardly be called more than that — of two natures had the virtue of clarity.

The Council of Ephesus of 449 was a nasty affair. Dioscorus set it up to achieve his own end, the condemnation of Flavian. He would not even allow Leo's *Tome*, which Flavian was happy to support, to be read. He proposed the council endorse what appeared to be an uncontroversial reaffirmation of Nicaea. Once this had been agreed he announced that Flavian had violated the creed and must be deposed. The doors of the church were flung open and a gang of heavyweights poured in. Dioscorus announced that all must sign the decree excommunicating Flavian, who had taken refuge in the sanctuary. Blank pieces of paper were provided for signatures. Flavian was so badly beaten that he died soon afterwards. In Rome, Leo denounced this 'robber council' to the emperor. Theodosius [II], once again outmanoeuvred, meekly told Leo that 'peace reigned and pure truth was supreme'. A new bishop of Constantinople, a protégé of Dioscorus, was eased into place. It was one of the last acts of Theodosius' life. Out hunting in July 450, he fell from his horse and died.

So here was a dispute that had been festering for twenty years but was still no closer to resolution. The impossibility of finding a coherent theological statement was now obvious. Even if a council had met in peace to discuss the matter, wrangling and rivalry would have disrupted it. The failure lay with Theodosius [II]. The full range of his legislation on religion is preserved in a separate section in the famous Theodosian Law Code of 438 and it can be seen that many of his laws appear to be responses to crises rather than part of a defined strategy. He should either have left the church to sort the matter out and concentrated on his political duties or imposed a solution. While claiming that he wished to gain the goodwill of 'Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' by maintaining orthodoxy, his inconsistency had simply allowed the bullyboys such as Cyril and Dioscorus to gain the upper hand.

There was then a remarkable development. Pulcheria emerged from the shadows and promptly took as her consort one Marcian, a soldier whom she elevated as emperor beside her. She was a supporter of Flavian and Leo and loathed Dioscorus. The remains of Flavian were welcomed back for burial in Constantinople. Pulcheria's niece, Galla Placidia, wife of the western emperor Valentinian III, wrote to her from Rome telling her to 'subvert the wretched Council of Ephesus' and to respect the primacy of Leo. Order was to be restored. A new council was to be summoned and this time it was to be within imperial reach, in Chalcedon, just across the Bosphorus from the capital.

No one could call the Council of Chalcedon of 451 harmonious. Sessions were often rowdy, rivals taunting each other with accusations of heresy. However, under the guidance of imperial commissioners whose names head the official accounts, some order was given to the proceedings. The Acts of the Council of 449 were read out and most of the bishops were ashamed at what they had consented to. Dioscorus blustered in his defence but he was eventually condemned and deprived of his see. His senior supporters were pardoned so long as they supported his condemnation and assented to the *Tome* of Leo which was now becoming the talisman of orthodoxy.

Then a new formula began to be put together. No one dared to mention Nestorius' name. Although he was alive, he was officially a heretic. Cyril's theology still had support and, while his Twelve Anathemas were rejected as too extreme, some of his earlier writings against Nestorius were more acceptable. It was decided that *Theotokos* would be part of any agreed formula. Leo's *Tome* was welcomed and a

declaration that Flavian had made of his views to the emperor was included among favoured documents. The bishops did begin to put these together but this time they had to contend with highly trained members of the imperial staff. These rejected one formula as too close to the beliefs of the condemned Dioscorus and then set up a small committee of bishops that they could supervise. [The emperor] Marcian met protests at the imposition of his authority by threatening to close down the council and transfer it to Rome! On 25 October 451, the emperor, accompanied by Pulcheria, crossed the Bosphorus. Acclaimed as 'the new Constantine', he presided over the session that affirmed a new Definition of Faith.

While much of the final wording of the Definition of Faith came from Cyril's works, it was the *Tome of Leo* that provided the most significant phrases. Christ was declared to be 'at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man'. He was begotten of the Father 'as of his Godhead' but born of the Virgin Mary, who was given the title of *Theotokos*. Within this 'one person, Christ had two [*sic*] natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of the union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence.' The extreme Alexandrian position that Jesus had only one incarnate nature was thus rejected. Ironically, the final definition was not, apart from the *Theotokos*, far from what Nestorius himself had preached! In fact, in his exile, he produced a text, only rediscovered in 1895, known as the *Bazaar of Heracleides*. Written before the Council of Chalcedon, it includes phrases such as 'the same one is twofold' that were very similar to those of Chalcedon.

[The emperor] Marcian had imposed his will on the church. He was not to miss his chance of improving church discipline and he now insisted that the bishops condemned abuses such as the sale of bishoprics. With the bishop of Alexandria deposed and the bishop of Rome not present, other than in the person of legates, the powers of the bishop of Constantinople, the emperor's 'own' bishop, could also be strengthened. Henceforth the bishop would be able to hear appeals against the decisions of the metropolitan bishops, including Antioch and Alexandria. He would be directly responsible for all the bishops of Thrace, the province of Asia and Pontus, as well as any bishop outside the borders of the eastern empire. While Constantinople remained second in place in honour to Rome, within the eastern empire it was to enjoy identical privileges to those of Rome in the west. The papal

legates were furious but were easily overruled. Other canons dealt with the monks. As they were in effect self-appointed and not officially clerics or subject to bishops, their unruly behaviour had to be contained. Now all monks had to be subject to a bishop and were bound to celibacy. Marcian signed off the council. 'All therefore shall be bound to hold the decisions of the sacred Council of Chalcedon and indulge no further doubts. Take heed therefore to this edict of our Serenity: abstain from profane words and cease all further discussion of religion [*sic*]'. Marcian even ordered his soldiers to take an oath of allegiance to the Chalcedonian decisions.

The declaration of Chalcedon was in fact a ritualistic formula. It was a statement of what was to be believed and did not actually explain anything. While contemporaries talked of Christ's human nature being expressed when he wept over the body of Lazarus and his divine nature expressed when he raised him from the dead, one could not go back to the gospels and apply the formula in any coherent way to other events in his life. There is no mention of a 'union of natures' in the New Testament. While the word used for 'person', the Greek *prosopon*, is found in the New Testament it is not in the sense used at Chalcedon. It was completely unclear how these natures, in any of the ways they were expressed, actually related to the 'historical' Jesus of the gospels. This was not the issue. No formula would have satisfied everyone. The crucial point was that once again it had been shown that only an emperor, with all the coercive force he had at his command, could define doctrine. He had, however, to be determined to assert this role. [The emperor] Marcian had behaved resolutely where Theodosius [II] had faltered.