Preface to the Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition

This book is a reprint of a book with a history. It is a history of curiosity and of growing excitement. I first wrote it in the form of a relatively short essay (virtually without footnotes) which appeared in 1996 as part of the series *Faire l'Europe: The Making of Europe*, directed by Jacques le Goff.

Over the next few years, however, I realized that I could hear behind me the roar of a dam burst. A remarkable surge of publications, of new discoveries and of new and daring perspectives was under way. It ensured that the centuries associated with the end of the Roman empire and the first centuries of the western Middle Ages (between 200 and 1000 A.D.) – previously dismissed as the "Dark" Ages – looked very different from how they had done before. New views had emerged, lively controversies had arisen concerning the rise of Christianity, the fall of the Roman empire, the origin and expansion of Islam, the conversion to Christianity of northern Europe and the establishment of the empire of Charlemagne. I needed to dive back into the flood and bring these changes in modern scholarship to the attention of readers in an expanded account. This was fully equipped with footnotes and bibliography, so that they also could dive in and join in the fun.

Hence what was called a Second Edition of the book appeared in 2002. It was considerably more than a mere re-edition. The title apart, it was a new book. But the surge in scholarship has continued unabated. It is only proper to pause once again to take breath. In this preface, I will sum up some recent arguments and make available, from the continued, mighty flood of publications, an inevitably short selection of recent works. I hope that readers will find these works helpful to continue the exploration of what has remained a hotly debated period. I do this so as to encourage readers to wander even more widely in this rapidly evolving and creative field. There

they will find many other outstanding works to which, for reasons of space alone, I was not able to refer.

A Wider Setting

First let me remind readers of the shape of the book. It is not a conventional book about Europe, or even about the history of Christianity. I have deliberately set my narrative against a far wider geographical background than that of most accounts. From the very first pages, we meet figures set against a landscape that embraces the whole of Eurasia and northern Africa, from Ireland to China and from the estuary of the Rhine (and, eventually, from Iceland) to the southern end of the Red Sea.

There are good reasons for having done this. For a historian of the ancient world in its last centuries, it is essential to place what we now call western Europe on the map. In the year 200 A.D., western Europe was barely perceptible as a distinct region. The Roman West was made up of a series of concentric rings. Its economic center of gravity lay far to the south – in north Africa and in southern Italy. The Mediterranean coastline of Spain and southern France was dotted with settlements that went back to the days of the ancient Greeks and the Carthaginians. By contrast, the lands further north – most of what we now call "western Europe": northern France, Belgium, Britain, the Rhineland, Switzerland, Austria, and Hungary – were still relatively raw territories, recently absorbed into the Roman order. Outside these concentric rings lay a further ring, made up, according to the Roman imagination, of feral persons – the "barbarians." Altogether, compared with the ancient empires that had grown up around the Mediterranean, in Egypt, in Mesopotamia, and on the Iranian plateau, what we now call "western Europe" was a small and marginal region. It lay far to the northwest of the ancient heartlands of civilization.

The View from Eurasia

The Roman empire around the Mediterranean in the West and the Persian empire between Mesopotamia and Central Asia in the East saw themselves as the "Two Eyes of the Earth."[1] Their continued conflict for the control of the Middle East was the only true world war of this period. In sheer mass and destructiveness, the repeated confrontations of Roman and Persian armies made what Europeans call "the barbarian invasions" appear like mere gang wars.[2] Yet, seen from the vast steppelands of Eurasia and the hot

deserts of Arabia and the Sahara even Rome and Persia seemed small. For Persians and Romans alike, the swathe of grazing land inhabited by nomad pastoralists, which swept in an almost unbroken stretch from the plains of eastern Hungary to the northern edge of China, remained a looming presence. These nomads were regarded as the immemorial antithesis to civilization. They were the Ultimate Barbarians – the barbarians *par excellence*. Occasionally they made their presence felt. For a short time (as we shall see), the nomadic empire of Attila bullied the Roman empire and struck fear into the Germanic tribes around the Roman frontiers. The book of Christopher Kelly has taken us into the court of Attila.[3] The work of Peter Heather has traced the destabilizing effect of the Hunnish empire on the settled populations of the Danube and of Germany.[4]

The Horizons of the Silk Road

What is less often realized is that the nomad confederacies of the Eurasian steppes acted as Europe's relay system along the long road to China. What we call the Silk Road was never a simple, commercial highway, the ancient equivalent of the Trans-Siberian railway. Instead, goods passed along it in the form of diplomatic interchanges between the great powers – between the empires of Rome, Persia, and China. The stepping stones on this long route were nomadic kingdoms which patrolled the routes and which absorbed the caravan cities of Central Asia and western China.[5]

Throughout this period (as we shall see, especially in chapters 1, 12, and 13), the material and cultural goods that crossed Eurasia included new religions. The Silk Road was dotted with communities of Christians. Their libraries and churches abutted Buddhist stupas in the middle of great caravan cities. Much of what we know about the beliefs and worldview of the Manichees (a radical sect of largely Christian origin) comes from manuscripts excavated in the oases of the Turpan Depression of western China. Western tourists who nowadays walk around the great adobe ruins of Gaocheng outside modern Turpan realize, with a slight shiver of surprise, that here, in the midst of the Taklamakan desert, Manichaeism – once the most loathed and systematically persecuted of Christian heresies in the Roman empire, whose radical and exotic doctrines had fascinated the young Augustine in fourth-century Carthage – was alive and well and, indeed, a state religion in the Uyghur, Turkish kingdom of Turpan at a time when Charlemagne ruled in the West.[6]

The mobility of Manichaeism and of other forms of Christianity along the Silk Road is a reminder that, for Eurasia as a whole, late antiquity and

the early Middle Ages were not a period characterized by insuperable boundaries. Goods, ideas, and persons traveled slowly but surely over huge distances. They crossed ancient political frontiers. They moved with ease across the seemingly unbridgeable frontier between the nomad and the settled worlds.

What is a Frontier?

Looked at from the steppe lands of Eurasia, the Roman frontier along the Rhine and Danube was a non-frontier. Both sides of it were green. No stark ecological chasm divided one side from the other, as the settled world was divided from that of the nomads in Inner Asia, Arabia, and the Sahara. Up to 400 A.D., two very different social orders faced each other across the Rhine and the Danube. But they were not social orders based upon unbridgeable and unchangeable differences in ecology, in technology, and even in mindset. For this reason, the contrast between "Romans" and "barbarians" – though it seemed so clear to the imagination of contemporaries – was constantly eroded by the facts of nature. The two groups shared a temperate climate which ensured that both Romans and "barbarians" were settled farmers. Like all great rivers (one thinks of the Rio Grande between Texas and Mexico), the Rhine and the Danube were as much joining places as they were dividing lines.

The Roman answer to this challenge had been to invent an absolute frontier where, in fact, no such frontier (such as that traditionally associated with the contrast between nomads and the settled land) existed. They treated all societies outside the political frontier of Rome as "barbarians." More than this: they consistently described all barbarians as ultimate barbarians. They treated the Germans as if they were no different from the nomads of the Eurasian steppes. They saw them as rootless, as bloodthirsty, as ever ready to "flood" the peaceful lands of the empire with murderous bands.

And why did they do this? A great scholar of Gaul and of the "barbarian" side of the Rhine frontier – John Drinkwater – has recently provided a cogent answer. He argues that emperor, military, and civilian populations alike needed the idea of a "barbarian threat" to justify their own existence. The threat of invasion justified high rates of taxation. It justified the splendid palaces and cities ringed with high walls which overlooked the Rhine and the Danube, from the North Sea to the Black Sea. It gave a *raison d'être* to a powerful and well-paid military class. Above all, it enabled the emperor to stand tall as the defender of civilization. By working on both sides of the frontier,

through the patient analysis of Roman sources checked against the findings of recent archaeology, Drinkwater has concluded that much of this was a bluff:

> The "Guard on the Rhine" [mounted along the Roman side of the frontier], which the imperial establishment sold so successfully to contemporaries and to later historians, was an artifact.[7]

Alas, as Drinkwater points out, the imperial establishment did their job only too well: "Like the ancients, we still seem to need the Germanic bogeyman."[8] Altogether the Roman government had a way of rendering absolute boundaries that were, in reality, extremely permeable. A brilliant and closely argued monograph by the late Yves Modéran has shown this happening also in North Africa. Through careful reading of the texts produced by Roman writers in late antique Africa, he shows how an ideological Iron Curtain came to be erected between Romans and Berbers (known to contemporaries as "Moors"). For much of the time, Romans and the Berbers of the mountainous hinterland of North Africa had coexisted. The Berbers were accustomed to a symbiosis with the Romans of the coast. Most of them had become good Christians. They gathered in churches many of which dated from the days of Saint Augustine. It looked as if joint Romano-Berber kingdoms would take over the Maghreb after the fall of Rome. The union of rough mountaineers with civilian Roman populations was not unlike the fusion of Romans and barbarians which had brought the Franks to power in northern Gaul.

The arrival of the armies of the East Roman emperor Justinian brought all that to an end. Seizing Carthage from the Vandals in 535, the east Roman government adopted, in Africa, the attitudes that had been current in Gaul and elsewhere in the fourth century. The "Moors" (the Berbers) were declared to be beyond the pale. They were treated as "outer barbarians." Latin authors writing in Carthage in the late sixth century wrote of these Berber Christians as if they were in no way different from the wild, pagan nomads of the Sahara. One wonders what the history of the Maghreb would have been like if Justinian had not brought the "Roman" empire, with its all too Roman attitudes to the outside world, back to Carthage, and if an ideological Iron Curtain had not been put in place between the Mediterranean coast of Africa and its wide hinterland. Perhaps – so Modéran speculates – a Berber Clovis might have emerged, as the end product of many generations of quiet symbiosis between Romans and settled "Moors," in that large and distant land which had once been so close to Rome.[9]

Altogether, a wide geographical focus which is prepared to look at both sides of the Roman frontiers helps to keep what we usually call the Age of

the barbarian invasions in perspective. In many parts of the Roman West (and especially in northwest Europe), this period is better described as the age of the re-drawing of notional frontiers after the evaporation of a Grand Illusion – the illusion of an unbridgeable difference between Romans and barbarians which had been fostered along the frontiers of the empire.

Christianity and Europe

But there is a further reason for the unusual geographical spread of this book. It is crucial to do justice to the diversity of the many Christianities of this time. For the entire period from 200 to 1000, Christianity remained predominantly a religion of Asia and of northern Africa. Though well established in parts of the western Mediterranean (and not least in large cities such as Rome and Carthage) Christianity spread slowly throughout the non-Mediterranean West. What we now call a distinctively "European" Christianity was unthinkable in the year 500 A.D. Even the notion of "Europe" itself only took on its modern meaning in around the year 650 A.D. (as we will see at the end of chapter 11). By the year 1000 A.D., what could be called a "European" Christianity had only recently been established, with the conversion of Germany, of parts of Eastern Europe, and of Scandinavia. The drama of the expansion of Christianity into northwestern Europe should not blind us to the fact that, seen from the viewpoint of the older, more deeply rooted Christian populations of North Africa, Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria, the Caucasus, and Mesopotamia, what we call Western Christendom was out on a limb. It was the Christianity of a peripheral zone.

It is important to do justice to this fact. In recent times, many Europeans have wished to insist that Europe is a "Christian" civilization. They claim that the centuries covered in this book are of particular importance. For it was then that the "Christian roots of Europe" were planted. It is not my intention to foster this self-congratulatory myth. A Europe with only "Christian roots" would be a very airless place, even for Christians. One might, indeed, say "particularly for Christians." For, throughout this period, so many Christians wrestled with remarkable creativity with the fact that they lived in a society whose roots were not Christian. We begin, in the early fifth century (at the end of chapter 3), with Augustine of Hippo, as he strove to find a place for the "earthly city" and for the values of this world – of the *saeculum* – in his monumental *City of God*, as the late Robert Markus has shown in a series of lucid and deeply committed studies.[10] We continue (in chapter 14 and again in chapter 20) with the learned men of Ireland and elsewhere, from the seventh century onward, as they faced a world where so

much that was essential to their own position in society was resolutely pre-Christian. The roots of northern societies – Irish, Anglo-Saxon, German, and Scandinavian – reached back into "times of yore," to a prestigious Dream Time before the coming of what the Irish called "the blessed white language" of the Christian Scriptures.

The constant presence of a profane, pre-Christian world, which pushed deep roots into the past and into the hearts of Christian believers, provided the populations of what we now call Europe with an invaluable "structural reserve" – a space for the profane that could be constantly drawn upon.[11] Without the tenacity of its gnarled, pre-Christian roots, modern Europe would have lacked the imaginative and intellectual "roughage" provided by an unresolved tension between the sacred and the profane. A Europe which grew only from "Christian roots" would have been a sadly anemic Europe.

Furthermore, modern insistence on the "Christian roots of Europe" has led to a subtle and dangerous slippage. Only too often, accounts of the Christianization of western Europe are written not as if Europe had "Christian roots," but rather as if Christianity itself had only "European roots." Despite the fact that the principal focus of this book is the slow emergence of a distinctive version of Christianity in western Europe, I trust that the reader will realize that the geographical spread of this book was intended to head the reader off from European chauvinism of this kind. The Greek and Middle Eastern world is present throughout the first four chapters. Chapters 12 and 13 are devoted specifically to the Christianities of the Middle East before and after the rise of Islam. Chapter 17 examines the crisis of Byzantine society in the eighth and ninth centuries, associated with the Iconoclastic Controversy.

What I would like to emphasize in this preface is that to do otherwise – to treat the Christianities of Byzantium, Africa, and Asia as if they formed only a distant and exotic backdrop to an exclusively European story – would be to miss one of the most exciting scholarly opportunities of the last ten years. Progress in the discovery of documents from the past of western Christianity has been slow. Of course, there have been some significant discoveries. In the field best known to me – that of the Africa of Saint Augustine – pleasant surprises continue to happen. More sermons of Augustine have been discovered, to add to those previously discovered and published in the 1990s by François Dolbeau.[12] Many anonymous sermons have been identified as coming from Africa in the fifth and sixth centuries, which adds an exciting new dimension to an African Christianity that is usually overshadowed by the mighty figure of Augustine.[13] As we will see, great strides have been made in interpreting the abundant parchment literature and documentation of the late Merovingian and Carolingian periods.

A New Frontier: the Christianities of the East

But these discoveries pale in comparison with advances in the study of the Christianities of the Middle East. Here a new world has been opened up. Manichaean documents in Coptic continue to be published – not least those found among the houses recently excavated in the Dakhleh Oasis of southern Egypt.[14] An entire Christian culture of remarkable wealth and diversity, attested in Syriac, has come to be studied as never before. Hitherto unknown Syriac manuscripts have come to light. Many of them are preserved in areas (such as Iraq and Syria) where recent events have made the fate of the Christian communities uncertain. What is at stake is the survival of the relics of an ancient Christian culture, directly inherited from the days of late antiquity. Many manuscripts date back to a time when Syriac was one of the most widespread learned languages of Asia.

Many exciting research initiatives have opened up to scholars. For example, those who want to savor the riches of this culture (in the form of digitalized manuscripts, expanded catalogues, constantly updated bibliographies, and detailed topographical studies that reveal an entire forgotten landscape) can now turn to the *Syriac Reference Portal* website directed by Professor David Michelson of Vanderbilt University with the help of an international team of collaborators. The creation of this *Syriac Reference Portal* shows how the field has come to attract growing numbers of scholars, who are anxious to explore an abundance of new evidence, and to propound new perspectives. It represents the opening of a new frontier in Christian studies and in studies of the pre-Islamic and Islamic Middle East.[15]

In light of this abundant evidence, a new generation of young scholars has begun to rewrite the history of Christianity in the Byzantine empire and the Middle East. To take one major example of a change of view, the Monophysite opponents of the council of Chalcedon are no longer seen (as they had been through Greek and Latin eyes) as no more than excitable Orientals who severed themselves from the collective wisdom of the Catholic and Orthodox world so as to retreat into inflexible and peripheral "minority" churches. This has been shown to have been far from the case. As opponents of the Chalcedonian state church of Byzantium, dissident Monophysite churchmen developed a robust sense of Christian community detached from the incubus of empire.[16] The Monophysite dissidence produced great theologians, ascetic heroes, and masters of spirituality.[17]

Nor were these debates confined within the frontiers of the Roman and Sasanian empires. An entire world has emerged, far to the south of the conventional boundaries of Rome and Persia. In Yemen and Ethiopia, the

clash of various forms of Christianity with Judaism created, in the sixth century, a situation of religious war that was conducted with an ideological fury that anticipated the spirit of the Islamic *jihâd* and of the medieval Christian Crusades.[18]

A Common Market of Ideas

Above all, the warring Christian churches of Asia and Africa turned the Middle East into a vast echo chamber, resounding with lively conversations. The literature of every church was characterized by debates with real or imagined rivals,[19] and by lists of questions and answers addressed to the learned by the faithful.[20] Such constant debate and questioning created a common language of thought which embraced all faiths, local languages and regions. It was the cyber-highway of the age. In the sixth and seventh centuries, this common language of thought reached from Alexandria to the Iranian plateau, bridging the frontier between Rome and Persia, to include the entire Middle East in a new common market of ideas.[21]

The men who contributed to this common market cared deeply about education. Based in the city of Nisibis (Nusaybin in modern Turkey), the "Nestorian" Christians of the Church of the East created an entire new system of Christian schooling. News of the distant schools of Nisibis greatly impressed westerners such as Cassiodorus.[22] They also cared about the Greco-Roman past. In the great Monophysite monastery of Qenneshre (The Nest of Eagles), beside the Euphrates, a learned man such as Bishop George of the Arabs could still pass on to his colleagues recondite information on the origin of the name of the river Tiber. This was in the 720s, that is, in the last days of the Merovingian dynasty in Gaul and nearly a hundred years after the Muslim conquest of the Middle East.[23]

The Entry of Islam

This brings us to Islam. And, when it comes to Islam, as we all know, modern attitudes have changed dramatically in the last ten years or so. The reader should know that chapter 13, on the Christian communities under Islamic rule, was prepared and written before the tragic events of September 11, 2001. These events and the wars and state of alarm which have followed them have brought Islam to the forefront of the concerns of Europeans and Americans alike.

Inevitably, these terrible events created a fraught situation, characterized by the revival of ancient prejudices and by urgent demands for quick answers. Yet the scholarship of the last ten years has been marked by remarkable and dispassionate advances in our understanding of the first centuries of Islamic rule in the Middle East.[24] These advances have linked up with the surge of scholarship that has revolutionized the study of Syriac Christianity in the periods both before and after the Islamic conquests. Altogether, the theme of Late Antiquity and Islam is in the air. We need only consult the superb catalogue of the exhibition entitled *Byzantium and Islam: A Transition*, which took place in 2012 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, to realize how much the study of the relations between Islam and the rich cultures of the pre-Islamic Middle East has advanced since the beginning of this century.[25]

Why has this been so? It is largely because we no longer treat Islam and Christianity as if they were totally incommensurable – as if they were hermetically sealed entities, incapable of communicating with each other. I trust that I made plain in chapter 13 that Islam was not a phenomenon that came out of the blue. The roots of Islam lay in an Arabian peninsula that was by no means a bleak and isolated desert. The Hijâz, in which the prophet Muhammad received his message, was part of the great echo chamber of religious ideas that had developed throughout the Middle East in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. We have also realized the zest with which the early Muslims appropriated and adapted the artistic and technical skills of the regions which they conquered. This is immediately apparent in the novel architecture of the Ummayad palaces of Jordan, such as Qusayr ʿAmra and Mshatta. These show a world whose artistic horizons had come to embrace both Byzantium and Iran.[26]

What has been less studied until now is the curiosity mingled with a sharp competitive edge with which the early Muslims engaged the Christian and Jewish communities of the Middle East. They came as conquerors. But they also believed that they held the best religion. We must remember that Muslims did not see themselves as upholding a religion that was utterly different from that of Jews and Christians (as paganism had been seen by Christians). Rather, Islam was seen by Muslims as the culmination of Judaism and Christianity. It was a religion "victorious over every religion."[27] But how could Muslims prove that they had the best religion? Only by scrutinizing and debating the beliefs of others, and by constantly measuring their own beliefs and practices against those of Jews and Christians. Put bluntly: Muslims needed Jews and Christians to tell them who they were. It was only through dialogue – and not through the crude fact of conquest – that Muslims could be confident that they, and they alone, were a distinctive and privileged religious community.

From Asceticism to Holy War

Hence the seriousness of Muslim intellectual engagement with the Christians around them. From a very early time, Arab Muslims joined in the theological and philosophical debates whose continued vigor and openness to questioners of all kinds we have recently come to appreciate in our study of the Syriac literature of the time.

We have begun to realize that the influence of these debates went deep. As the challenging book of the late Tom Sizgorich has shown, the crucial notion of the *jihâdi* – of the warrior saint in early Islam, who died fighting the infidels – was precipitated by arguments as to which form of heroism was superior: the world-denying asceticism of the martyr and the desert monk, or the world-affirming energy of committed Muslims engaged in holy war. It was a crucial debate about different forms of militant devotion, and about what form best summed up the virtues of the Muslim community.[28]

The Muslim idealization of death on the battlefield should not be seen as an unthinking expression of bloodthirsty fanaticism. It had been arrived at through a conscious wish on the part of Muslims to define themselves against non-Muslims – especially against Christians. Muslims continued to respect Christian notions of holiness. But they needed to put forward an alternative that went beyond the Christians. What they found was a hard doctrine. The notion of *jihâd* repelled Jews and Christians. Ever since, it has played a major role in the negative image of Islam. But, like calluses raised on the skin by constant rubbing, it was a hard doctrine which emerged through constant, close contact with Christian monks, with Christian legends of the martyrs, and with Christian debaters.

Last but not least, the Muslims absorbed the populations of the Middle East by offering acceptable narratives of their own success as conquerors. These narratives paid attention to Christian opinion and often fastened on and transformed Christian local traditions.[29] Far from being converted violently at the point of the sword, many Christians slowly but surely talked themselves into becoming Muslims. Not all Christians did this. Up to the year 1000, Muslims and not Christians were in the minority in the Middle East. Many Christian churches have survived up to this day. But those who did convert to Islam were enabled by these stories to take a large part of their own past, their own legends, and their own local traditions with them into the new faith. The civilization of medieval Islam drew much of its strength and richness from these incessant conversations, of which we today can catch only the occasional echo. In this and in so many other ways, we can see how the history of early Islam was

inextricably entangled with the history of the Christianities of the East. For that reason, no history of Christendom – not even of western Christendom – can ignore it.

Civilization and the Fall of Rome

But now is the time to return to the West, and to ask a blunt question: what was the overall evolution of western Europe before and after the fall of the Roman empire? How have our views on this crucial question changed since the beginning of the century?

What has changed is that a strident current of public opinion has turned to the fall of Rome as a warning for contemporary Europe. Many state that the fall of the Roman empire was an unmitigated catastrophe, and that this catastrophe could repeat itself in our own times:

> Rome is the cradle of our Western civilization – the most advanced and superior civilization the world has ever known. … the history of Rome … serves as a warning … [for Rome] suffered a loss of belief in its own civilization. The Romans … did not perceive the immigration of the Barbarians as a threat until it was too late. … But then, on December 31st in the year 406, the Rhine froze and tens of thousands of Germanic Barbarians crossed the river, flooded the Empire and went on a rampage, destroying every city they passed. … The fall of Rome was a traumatic experience.[30]

In the words of another writer, "the storm of the Barbarian Migrations – the *Völkerwanderung* – [and t]he collapse of the Roman Empire brought about a regression of civilization that was only brought to an end … seven hundred years later."[31]

It is revealing that these two seemingly innocuous summaries of common views of the fall of Rome appear in statements issued by two leaders of extreme xenophobic movements – Geert Wilders, in his notorious speech in Rome of 25 March 2011, and Thilo Sarrazin, in his provocative book, *Deutschland schafft sich ab* [Germany does away with itself] (by failing to control Turkish immigration).

The story of the fall of Rome has always left in the back of our minds a heavy sediment of fear and regret. Such a narrative is calculated to be disturbing. It presents a complacent empire, a silent build-up of pressure from outside, a sudden breakthrough, a murderous rampage and then, silence … the extinction of civilization for many centuries. What is regrettable is that this narrative should erupt, from time to time, to serve the purposes of toxic political movements in contemporary Europe. For this

reason it is particularly important to get the story right. What really happened in western Europe between 400 and 800 A.D.?

The Drift from Rome

There are today many books on this subject, to which we can now turn. I trust that the reader will forgive me if I concentrate on a few major works to which I have recently turned frequently and with gratitude when writing a study of the use of wealth in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages – *Through the Eye of a Needle. Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD*.[32] I trust that the reader will do what I did when using them – work outwards from their abundant footnotes and bibliographies (like exploring the root systems of great plants) to find yet further exciting articles and books.

One of the most invigorating of these books is Guy Halsall's *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568*.[33] This book contains careful and fair-minded surveys of the principal points of debate between scholars. How did barbarians think of themselves: that is, what role, if any, did a sense of belonging to a specific "ethnic" group play in the relations of barbarians to each other and to the Roman populations? How did barbarians settle within the empire: was it a brutal and disruptive land grab, or was it based on a carefully organized funneling of pre-existing tax revenues to barbarian "guests" in such a way that the social structures of each region were left undisturbed? When we speak of "Barbarian Migrations," what precise patterns did these follow: did the barbarians come in uncontrollable "floods" (as is so often implied), or were their movements more piecemeal and less dramatic?

Above all, Halsall's great skill as an archaeologist has enabled him to tell the story of the fall of Rome as a silent change. He traces the dwindling of Rome. Through careful attention to an archaeological record that stretches from Britain to the Danube he shows how Rome slowly lost its grip on the imagination and on the value systems of the inhabitants of the empire and their neighbors in the course of the fifth and early sixth centuries. We should note what he does not find. He does not find evidence of widespread destruction in the wake of imagined barbarian hordes. Nor does he find a catastrophic drop in the standard of living of the Roman populations. Still less does he find evidence of monolithic barbarian immigration into Roman territory.

Instead, Halsall examines changing forms of burial, changing messages of prestige and gender relations communicated through jewelry and weapons, and hints of changed horizons revealed by changes of fashion in personal

ornament, as motifs taken from Rome, Scandinavia, and the steppes of Asia competed for prominence. These reveal a silent turning of the tide that finds no mention in the sources on which conventional narratives of the fall of Rome are based. Halsall uses the well-chosen words of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* to describe this change. It was the result of innumerable "unhistoric acts" by those who "lived … a hidden life and rest in unvisited graves."[34] All over Europe, relatively well-to-do men and women – Romans and barbarians alike – had begun to vote with their feet against Rome. After centuries in which Rome had been the central point of reference for ideas of civilization, of proper conduct, and of proper gender relations, they had begun to see that, despite the fears of many of them, there was nothing wrong about not being Roman.

Before and After Rome: States, Taxes, and Societies

Halsall's synthesis sets the scene for Chris Wickham's magnificent book, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800*.[35] This book will replace Pirenne's *Mohammed and Charlemagne* as the starting point of all future discussion of the society and economy of early medieval Europe. What these two books have in common is that both spell out the long-term rhythms of a change in which barbarian invasions and the fall of Rome were only one stage among many.

For Wickham, the story begins with the weakening ability and final failure of the Roman state to bring in the taxes. For the late Roman state was notorious for its unusual fiscal appetite. Indeed, apart from demanding taxes, the Roman empire had never done as much for its citizens as our exalted image of Rome might lead us to expect. It did not protect the Roman populations against the barbarians. Rather, as we have seen, it created the image of a barbarian threat so as to justify its fiscal demands. Nor did it bring much security to the civilian population. Recently discovered letters of Augustine reveal a high level of violence in town and countryside that had nothing to do with the barbarian invasions. A nun was raped while visiting a neighboring estate to buy wool.[36] A retired military man (in league with a corrupt bishop) terrorized a village.[37] Slave traders descended on isolated hamlets in the mountains behind Hippo, "with horrifying yells, dressed like soldiers or barbarians."[38] Officials were lynched by angry mobs.[39] The extent of sectarian violence in Africa was notorious.[40] Even at the height of the empire, life was dangerous in any part of it: a man was advised to make his will, in case of sudden death "at the hands of the [barbarian] enemy, of brigands, or through the cruelty or hatred of a powerful man."[41]

But there was one thing the fourth-century Roman state did well, which was to extract money from its subjects. Paradoxically, as Wickham and others have pointed out, high taxation did not ruin the populations of the empire. Rather, high tax demands primed the pump for a century of hectic economic growth.[42] Fiscal pressure forced open the closed economies of the countryside. The peasantry had to increase production so as to earn the money with which to pay taxes. The collection of taxes offered unparalleled opportunities for enrichment for landowners, tax collectors, and bureaucrats. What was gathered through taxes was redistributed at the top, in the form of gifts and salaries paid in solid gold. This process created the swaggering new class whose worldly ambitions we describe in chapter 2. The villas of this class continue to impress the archaeologists.[43] In the irreverent words of archaeologists discussing the great villas of Spain, theirs was a prosperity "tied to an imperial gravy train."[44]

The problem was that once the gravy train was jolted by a series of military crises, none of which were catastrophic in themselves, the great engine of enrichment stalled and, eventually, stopped. What strikes Wickham was the speed with which upper-class Roman society sank back to a low level. No longer disciplined by the tax collector, the peasantry slacked off. They returned to subsistence farming. Rents fell. As incomes dwindled, the rich no longer reached out, as they had done in the glory days of the fourth century, to buy fine pottery, statuary, high-quality wines and exotic foods. They made do with the products of their region. Trade dwindled. Horizons became more limited. As Wickham sees it, we end, around the year 600 A.D., with a world of smaller units, ruled by low-pressure states. The local aristocracies declined into genteel poverty. The days of the great villas were past. At a time when the floors of country houses all over the eastern empire still glittered with mosaics covered with merry and sensuous mythological figures, the villas of the West had been turned into farmhouses.[45] As a result, in Wickham's opinion, if anyone was happy in the early Middle Ages, it was the peasantry. Freed at last from the double pressure of landlords and tax collectors, they settled back to enjoy a low-profile golden age.

In Wickham's view, barbarian invasions, as we usually imagine them, played little role in this slow process of downsizing. They brought no widespread destruction. But, in one way, the barbarian invasions and the civil wars of the early fifth century did prove decisive. They broke the spine of the empire as a tax-gathering machine. Within a century, they had overturned one of the "pillars of bigness" on which not only the court and the army, but the economy and the high pitched social structure of the later Roman empire, had depended.[46]

"Local Romanness" against "Central Romanness": Regionalism and the End of Empire

But how had this come to happen so quickly, and with such apparently irrevocable results? Wickham's emphasis on the collapse of the capacity and the will to tax can be fleshed out by a factor which Halsall has underlined. We must never forget how intensely regional the society of the Roman West had always been. The empire governed through enlisting the support of the local elites. These were members of the minor nobility. Their wealth and horizons did not extend far beyond their city or their province. They were proud little men and women. They were often less subservient to the court than were the grandees associated with the Senate of Rome and the imperial administration. The barbarian invasions of the early fifth century (and the civil wars that accompanied them) revealed the crucial gap between such persons and the central government: "the key factor in the break-up of the Empire was the exposure of a critical fault-line between the imperial government and the interests of the regional elites."[47] Reviewing the history of the fifth-century West, Peter Heather has come to the same conclusion. In a pungent sub-heading, he summed up the fall of the empire in the West as "The Destruction of Central Romanness." By this he meant the loss of the ability of the Roman state, its servants, and those with an interest in maintaining the ideology of empire at full strength to impose their will on the "local Romans" of the provinces.[48]

Paradoxically, the defeat of "Central Romanness" did not lead to a victory of barbarism. In most provinces it was a victory of "local Romanness" in collaboration with barbarians at the expense of the imperial center. It is this alliance of local Romans and local barbarians (and not the imagined ravages of the barbarian invasions) which needs to be explained. Somehow, a tacit deal between barbarians and local Romans was struck in the course of the fifth century. It was a deal based on innumerable "unhistoric acts" of symbiosis, collaboration, even of cultural treason. What did this deal mean for the overall development of the West?

Put bluntly: what brought down the western empire was the speed with which the barbarian armies were able to create local power blocs through collaboration with the local Romans. For the local elites, the barbarians brought a Rome of sorts to their own region. These power blocs attracted Roman litigants, Roman bureaucrats, Roman courtiers, and Roman military personnel. By the end of the fifth century, Latin literature began to flourish at barbarian courts.[49] The western empire was not so much

destroyed as eroded and finally rendered unnecessary by a score of little Romes, rooted in more restricted areas of control. These little Romes were largely in the hands of the local nobilities, of energetic little men who had replaced and even helped to despoil the grandees of the imperial *ancien régime*.

But there was a cost. Not only did barbarians become more Roman. Everyone has tended to approve of that development, both at the time and in the modern scholarly tradition. Studies of the Romanization of the barbarians abound. But the notion that Romans might want to cease to be Romans has always caused disquiet. Surely so massive an identity, piled up over the centuries, and of such a superior nature, cannot – indeed, should not – shift within a few generations? But this may have happened more often than we think. Like sex in the Victorian Age, cases of well-to-do Romans collaborating from an early time with the barbarians, and adopting barbarian customs – above all, a taste for war – were seldom mentioned in polite society. But, like sex, they happened.

Soldier and Civilian in a Changing World

In the last ten years, we may have come closer to understanding this strange blockage in our own perception of the fifth-century world. Studies of the late Roman empire had tended to bifurcate. The study of the frontiers and of the army tends to be separated from the study of the civilian population. Hence a bias toward a view of the Roman world which privileged the magnificently voluble intellectuals of the Mediterranean at the expense of a very different sort of local Romans, connected with the Roman frontiers and with the Roman army. A zone of silence tends to fall between the two components of Roman society, as if they lived on two separate planets.[50] As a result, the barbarians appear to have come from nowhere. In fact, the barbarians had followed paths already laid down by the military that led straight to the heart of Mediterranean society

In the late Roman empire, military and civilian had long lived cheek by jowl. Military men and military values were mixed like iron filings into the clay of civilian life. They carried with them a distinctive culture that was already halfway to the barbarian world. Many features which we nowadays tend to associate with the fierce barbarians of the north began as customs of the Roman military. Embroidered trousers, great swinging cloaks, large gold brooches, and heavy belt-buckles were only the most visible among them.[51]

From Civil War to Convulsion

Of these military habits, the most upsetting to the civilian population was the zest for civil war. Again and again – indeed nine times in 83 years (from 312 to 395) – Roman soldiers had butchered their colleagues in murderous civil wars. Emperors wept (or, at least, made sure that everybody believed that they had wept) as they viewed the piles of Roman corpses that strewed the battlefield after such engagements.[52] As Brent Shaw has shown, the true "killing fields" of the fourth century were not along the frontiers. They were in northern Italy and the Balkans, where sanguinary battles were regularly fought between rival emperors.[53]

What happened in the fifth century was that civil war expanded to include "proxy war" through the use of barbarian groups. Careful studies of the chronology and logistics of the civil wars of the early fifth century have shown that all the major breakthroughs by the barbarians either were part of maneuvers directly connected with civil wars, or at least were made possible by the distraction caused by civil wars. Far from rushing headlong from the woods of Germany to the heart of the Mediterranean, most barbarians were as good as "bussed" there by rival Roman usurpers – first to southwest Gaul and then across the Pyrenees into Spain.[54] It was not the barbarian invasions in themselves that changed the face of Europe. It was the synergy between barbarian groups, the long Roman practice of civil war, and the opportunism with which local Romans exploited both barbarians and civil war conditions for their own purposes. For this reason, it may be wise to abandon the term "barbarian invasions" as a description of the period. It would be better to use a term that has been used by historians of Japan when speaking of the century of civil war which afflicted Kyoto and other regions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – that is, "convulsion": an involvement of all segments of the population in a shake-up from which a very different society would emerge.[55]

Loyalty: from Emperor to King

A central feature of this new society proved to be a former Roman military habit that was destined for a long future: that was the habit of personal loyalty. This has been made clear by the remarkable book of Stefan Esders, *Sacramentum fidelitatis: Treueid, Militärwesen und Formierung mittelalterlicher Staatlichkeit* [Oath of fidelity: loyalty oath, military culture and the formation of a medieval style of rule]. Esders shows that the intense personal

loyalty expected by a leader of his followers, which seemed to characterize barbarian society, did not come from a purely Germanic, heroic past. It came, rather, from the practice of the late Roman army. The Roman armies cohered because of a binding personal oath of the soldiers to the Emperor, "as if in the bodily presence of a god." In the fourth and fifth centuries, this oath was also exacted by the emperors from barbarian groups. In the succeeding centuries, the Roman soldier's oath of loyalty was extended by barbarian kings to their own followers and, eventually, to the entire civilian population.

As a result, in many parts of Europe, a distinctive practice of the Roman army of the fourth century formed the basis of the early medieval state. The iron filings of military practices which had already been mixed into the civilian populations in the fourth century became, in later centuries, the iron net which bound military and civilian alike into new kingdoms.[56]

From Civilian to Warrior

Increasingly, a useful subject was deemed to be a man of war, not a civilian. Hence an irrevocable change in the texture of the governing classes throughout western Europe, whose importance has been well appreciated by Peter Heather.[57] Well-to-do Romans took to the sword. One suspects that many did this with less regret than we might expect.

In part the change was forced upon them. The establishment of the barbarian kingdoms did not bring peace. Throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, Britain, Gaul, and Spain were crisscrossed by small armies engaged in the short, "dirty" wars which I described in chapter 3. Towns came to value their walls. They also needed to maintain their morale. Lisa Bailey has shown this in her study of a collection of sermons preached in Gaul at this time. In these sermons, a premium was placed on consensus and on the avoidance of factionalism, which might lead to the weakening of resolve in the city and to its eventual betrayal to outside enemies.[58] One preacher even advised his flock to avoid sarcastic jokes: they were not to call an elderly man "baba" or a dark-skinned person "Mr. Silvershine."[59] The inhabitants of Trier remembered that their city had been betrayed to the barbarians by a leading citizen because of a coarse joke made by an emperor at the expense of the citizen's wife (whom the emperor had seduced): "You have a beautiful bath house; but you wash in cold water."[60]

They also needed to defend themselves. Sometime in the fifth century, the cities of Gaul developed armed militias. We do not know when this break with Roman traditions occurred. It was one of the many "unhistoric acts" by which post-imperial Europe slowly took on a different, less Roman face.[61]

The militarization of society seems to have happened more rapidly in Britain than anywhere else. The local elites took up arms with gusto. They beat the Saxons to a draw, checking their advance into what is now western England for over a century. In their hatred of the Saxon barbarians they were more Roman than the Romans. As late as the tenth century, the *Armes Prydein* – the "prophecy of Britain" – expressed the hope that the Saxons would be sent back home where they belonged, across the North Sea, and that the entire former Roman province of Britain would be united under one king.[62] In the sixth century, the Britons were proud to wear Roman-style footwear. They forbade their clergymen to wear long, "barbarian" hair. Only a short Roman haircut for them! Yet, when these fiercely militarized men appeared on the Continent, they were not recognized as Romans. By a cruel irony, these proud "local Romans" were lumped together with their Saxon enemies. Both groups were treated as "outer barbarians" to be driven from the shores of Gaul.[63] "Local Romans" had evolved so differently in different regions that they were no longer recognizable to each other. But now their menfolk all carried swords.

By the year 600, we are in a very different Europe. As Walter Goffart has pointed out in his thought-provoking book, *The Barbarian Tides*, the greatest change of all was well under way. This was a process of drastic "simplification." In its upper reaches, the variety of statuses and professions which had characterized late Roman society had withered away. Civilians were squeezed out. We are left with a stark division between the clergy and a militarized aristocracy, between men of prayer and men of the sword.[64]

Catastrophists

Readers acquainted with the historiographical controversies surrounding the fall of Rome and its consequences will note that there are some books to which I have not turned. They tend to be those that present the history of the period as one dominated by a single, unrelieved catastrophe. Their authors often call themselves "catastrophists." They claim that certain basic aspects of the ancient world well and truly came to an end, and that they did so because of overwhelming biological or ecological disasters. It would be unwise to ignore many of these catastrophes. For instance, the pandemic plague which raged in western Eurasia from 543 to around 750 continues to attract the attention of scholars.[65] We should also take note of evidence that seems to indicate a deterioration of the climate of western Europe at this time. In the words of Fredric Cheyette, the possibility of a "climatic

anomaly" is a "question to be pursued" by those who wish to study the shift from a Roman to a post-Roman landscape.[66]

These are probable and sobering contentions. When applied to the charged issue of the fall of Rome, however, the wish to discover a catastrophe can lead scholars to tendentious and ill-supported polemics. *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* by Bryan Ward-Perkins falls into this category.[67] It steers dangerously close to those conventional images of the fall of Rome from which, as we have seen, extremist politicians and demagogues in contemporary Europe have conjured up a toxic discourse based on prejudice and fear.

In such accounts, we are first presented with an idealized image of the Roman empire; it was "in some ways a wonderful precedent for much that modern Europe aspires to."[68] Then we pass to a vivid account of the violences that accompanied the barbarian invasions. We are told that "it is now fashionable to play down the violence and unpleasantness of the invasions that brought down the empire in the West."[69]

In fact, few scholars do this. The views of an extreme proponent of a relatively untroubled absorption of the barbarians into Roman society (the highly intelligent and provocative Walter Goffart) are caricatured. Ward-Perkins wrongly implies that Goffart's studiously relaxed attitude to the settlement of the barbarians is widely shared by other scholars – that it has become part of a fashion.[70]

Furthermore, the sources to which Ward-Perkins appeals in order to build up this image of devastation have been shown to offer a different, less dramatic picture. In the words of Neil McLynn, on poems written at the time in Gaul, "the invaders are introduced only to be shrugged off."[71] If anything, concentration on the barbarians alone – without giving due weight to civil war and to the agency of local Romans – trivializes the very real "convulsion" through which Gaul passed at this time.

What should be stressed is that these assertions – the infinite superiority of Rome and the unpleasantness of the barbarians – are intended to frame a grandiose theory. This theory associates the barbarian invasions and the fall of Rome with a catastrophe from which there would be no return for half a millennium. In Ward-Perkins' opinion, the catastrophe took the form of the dislocation of a system of economic specialization which had once provided the inhabitants of the Roman world with a high level of basic comfort – which had put tiles on their roofs, high-quality ceramics on their tables, and money in their pockets. What followed were grim and monochrome centuries, characterized by "drafty timber walls, rotting and leaking roofs, and dirty floors."[72] They indicate "decline on a scale that can reasonably be described as 'the end of a civilization'."[73]

One can debate, point by point, this black and white contrast between the Roman and the post-Roman worlds.[74] It is a topic on which there is widespread, and frequently fruitful, argument between many outstanding scholars. What is misleading in Ward-Perkins' presentation is the brutal flattening of history which the notion of catastrophe implies. It is quite possible for a society to unravel along the lines that both Halsall and Wickham have indicated. This unraveling could indeed be exceedingly unpleasant. I trust that no reader takes away from my book the impression that the going was easy in the late antique and early medieval world. I am in entire agreement with Wolfgang Liebeschuetz when he reminds us that "The fall of the Roman Empire was accompanied by changes which most people would view as a serious worsening of life if they were to happen to themselves."[75]

But even the "worsening of life" to which Liebeschuetz refers has a history. It has multiple causes which have to be understood. The pace with which this worsening set in has to be followed region by region, generation by generation. The centuries from the fall of Rome to Charlemagne cannot be treated as the result of a single, catastrophic crash, from which there could be no return. Put briefly, there were many "afters" even After Rome.

Christianity: a History of Change

But another blunt question has to be asked: what about Christianity before and after the fall of Rome? The rise and expansion of Christianity in late antique and early medieval Europe is a topic calculated to engage the interest of modern readers, especially given the recent emergence of religion as a force in public life in America, Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. On the crucial theme of the rise of Christianity, a decade of scholarship has brought us exciting new perspectives.

In the first place, we have learned that Christianity did not simply rise and triumph in this period. It changed perpetually. We are not dealing with a sacred juggernaut which gathered speed after the conversion of Constantine in 312, and then proceeded, undeterred by the ruin of the empire, to make its way, essentially unchanged, through the pagan territories of Germany and the British Isles, until it came to rest on the shores of Iceland, Greenland, and the Baltic. This view of the expansion of Christianity makes for a fine story, filled with dramatic encounters and played out by vivid and well-known figures – by popes, bishops, and holy men and women, not to mention the colorful rulers on whom the Christian missionaries impinged. But it is a two-dimensional history. It is not a history of change. It fails to do justice to those innumerable "unhistoric acts" by humble men and women

which, slowly but surely, changed the face of Christianity itself generation by generation.

In this respect, recent archaeological studies have given us a view of the development of Christianity from the ground up.[76] First and foremost, these studies have shown that many of the institutions which we take for granted as central and unchanging features of Christianity emerged more slowly than we had thought.

Before the Cemetery

To take one instance: clearly demarcated Christian cemeteries did not develop until at least 700 A.D. The work of Éric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, has shown that, throughout this period, Christians buried their dead like other Romans – in family tombs. These family tombs often lay among pagan graves. Christians were also buried in the collective graveyards of the trade associations to which they belonged, along with pagan fellow-members. Christian cemeteries only emerged in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. Only then did the notion of the cemetery as a distinctive piece of "holy ground," reserved for the Christian dead alone, become widespread.[77]

What does this absence mean? It means that we are looking at the last, vigorous chapter of the history of the Roman family. Up to 700 A.D., it was assumed that the Christian family cared for their own dead. The clergy played little role in burial and none whatsoever in the arrangement and decoration of tombs. It was sufficient that the souls of the dead were remembered in the prayers of the church, no matter where their bodies lay; and that their souls were "fed" at the altar, through offerings of the faithful on their behalf at the time of the Eucharist.[78] But no attempt was made to create a special space around the Christian dead, to mark them off from their pagan and Jewish neighbors.

The absence of cemeteries reflected something deeper within the Christian community – an ancient balance between the clergy and the Christian family. When the balance between family and clergy was finally upset, after 700 A.D., a tectonic plate shifted deep within the Christian community. The Christian family surrendered a large part of their care of the dead to the clergy. For, as Michel Lauwers has shown, in his book on the "birth of the cemetery," the medieval cemetery was the creation of the clergy. The earth of the cemetery was made sacred by the blessing of the priest. The deceased were admitted to it by the clergy alone, who now led the funeral. Such a development had been unthinkable a few centuries before.[79]

Religion and the Household: the Creation of the Private

Rebillard's book forms part of a renewed appreciation of the role of the family and of household religion in the spread and consolidation of Christianity. The remarkable study of Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity*, goes yet further. It is based upon detailed archaeological study of the entire Mediterranean, from Spain to Ephesus. It adds an entire new dimension to our image of the expansion of Christianity. For Bowes has found private churches everywhere, linked to villas, palaces, and farms. In the Christian communities formed around private churches, the master or mistress of the house – and not the bishop – had the last word.[80]

Altogether, we are looking at a Christianity from which the hierarchy of the church was as absent as it was from the ancient Christianity of the graveyards. This was not an "unchurched" Christianity. But it was a Christianity in which the churches were not in the hands of the clergy. They were in the hands of private patrons who paid the salaries, provided the buildings, and set the tone for whatever clergymen they decided to hire, with little or no reference to the bishop.

Not surprisingly, "a whisper of tensions" surrounded many such Christian foundations.[81] But to see this situation as reflecting merely an on-going tension between laity and clergy – and especially a charged tension between women as patrons and celibate male priests – is not to go deep enough. An entire Roman way of doing religion was at stake. In Rome, the household had been an unchallenged center of religious practice. Religion was not based on a division between laity and clergy. Rather, it was a matter of family and friends. Bowes points out that the distinction which early medieval bishops drew increasingly between the "public" space of the church and the "private" space of the household was a new one. It left the household depleted. The household was now treated as purely "private" space. It was left to women, who could read and pray as much as they liked, as long as they kept to their bedrooms.[82]

"Private" space was suspect space – a space of sullen opposition, of whispered heresies, of a daily life rendered profane and unmemorable by the daily taint of sex. Only bishops and a celibate clergy (along with a few leading members of the laity, such as kings and their counsellors) were allowed to take initiatives in the "public" space of the church. This meant that only they could be singled out as the protagonists of narratives of the expansion of Christianity. A church in which the bishops and clergy stood in the full glare of public life was a church no longer dogged by the shadow of

those innumerable men and women who had made its progress possible in earlier times. Once again, as in the case of the rise of the Christian cemetery, a profound but barely chronicled mutation of Christianity signaled a yet deeper change – the decline and fall of the Roman household.[83]

Recent studies have tended to concentrate on the veiled presence of lay patrons (often great women from senatorial families) who remained a constant force in the cultural life and ecclesiastical politics of late antique and early medieval Rome.[84] Not surprisingly, perhaps, we have a soft spot for the role of the noblility in the conversion of Europe – and especially for nobles who came from families connected with the ancient Senate of Rome. But I wonder whether we are, perhaps, looking too high up the social scale in our study of the lay penumbra of the church. At lower levels of society (and especially in the new Christianities of the north) the role of the family remained central to humbler Christians – to petty noblemen, to well-to-do farmers, even to peasants. Churches were erected by humble people – such as the villagers of North Africa of the time of Augustine, who covered the plateau of Numidia with sturdy "houses of the saints,"[85] or the slaves on royal estates in Visigothic Spain, who would club together to build a church "out of their poverty."[86] Altogether, on a day-to-day basis, Christianity progressed from the household outwards: through the exchange of Christian spouses, through the acquisition of Christian slaves, through the circulation of Christian rituals – and not only through the preaching of bishops and clergymen.

The Second Church

As Julia Smith points out in a learned and thoughtful study, *Europe after Rome*, "The domestic household was one of the most effective – if least well-documented – focuses for religious change."[87] "Slow, almost unchronicled cultural seepage,"[88] and not the heavy tread of missionaries and bishops, was what often began, and then completed, the "sewing together of church and people" (to use the Old Irish phrase) across northern Europe.

There always lay a "second Church" outside the church of the bishops. This was the world of Christian visionaries, diviners, healers, and purveyors of Christian rituals. There were also innumerable unknown hermits, many of whose caves have been discovered in the Pyrenees, scribbled with the barely literate graffiti of crowds of pious visitors (to which Mark Handley has drawn our attention in his masterly study of the Christian inscriptions of Gaul and Spain between 300 and 750).[89]

Put bluntly, Christianity did not come to Europe in a single, neatly wrapped package, with a crisp structure of popes, bishops, priests, and laity.

It was constantly challenged to define its own identity. Like any other group in search of an identity, it did so by asserting its origins and its boundaries. Christians insisted that Christianity reached back to a heroic, "primordial" past – to the world of the Apostles and the martyrs. Monks were admired as the avatars of long-dead heroes: they stood for "a numinous affinity between themselves and their martyr ancestors."[90] In the early Middle Ages, the missionaries of northern Europe stepped into the role of the martyrs and the monks. They were thought of as having relived in Ireland, Britain, and Germany the "primordial" moment of the first mission of the Apostles. An electrifying sense of freshness runs through the writings of Saint Patrick and Boniface. Ian Wood's fine article on "The Ends of the Earth" in the early medieval imagination explains how such feelings also motivated the more sedentary Bede.[91] The sense that they were re-enacting the Acts of the Apostles gave courage and hope to these missionaries. But this sense of drama pushed to the edge of the page the grey penumbra of "cultural seepage", through Christian households, individuals, and wandering religious experts, that made the actions of the missionaries possible and enduring.

Christian Identity: Drawing the Frontier

While martyrs, monks, and missionaries manned the battlements of the Christian community, the frontiers of the Christian community were patrolled on a day-to-day basis by bishops and clergymen. It was as porous a line of division as any which had once stood between the Roman and the barbarian sides of the Rhine. Paganism lay on both sides of the largely artificial frontier of the church. Christians had to be persuaded to be Christians first, and everything else second. They had to be prevailed upon to believe that the large deposit of "cultural stuff" which they had in common with their non-Christian neighbors – shared burial customs, shared neighborhoods, shared rhythms of the year, a shared culture, shared loyalties to city, empire, and people (indeed, the low-profile but tenacious sense of a shared humanity) – should take second place to their Christian identity.[92]

The Destruction of the Temples

As modern scholars of ethnicity have reminded us, a sense of specific religious or ethnic identity usually runs on a low voltage. The shared "cultural stuff" that links members of a group to members of other groups, through common social and cultural bonds, usually counts for more, on a day-to-day

basis, than does the assertion of sharp ethnic or religious differences. Only in situations of conflict does the voltage suddenly increase. Worse still (as the horrors of the Balkan wars of the 1990s have shown), acts of violence escalate the sense of ethnic identity at the expense of shared considerations of neighborhood and common decency. Observers of recent ethnic conflict have concluded that acts of violence are not necessarily driven in the first place by a sharp sense of ethnic difference. Rather, it is the other way round. Whether in an unpremeditated manner or through cynical manipulation, violence in itself creates the sense of difference.[93]

We should read accounts of what we call "Christian intolerance" in action in the later empire with this insight in mind. The destruction of pagan temples was as much an exercise in boundary definition as it was the expression of a pre-existing Christian rage against paganism. The careful study carried out by Johannes Hahn and his colleagues of the destruction and conversion of temples throughout the Roman empire has shown this clearly.[94] This study proves that most acts of destruction were carefully focused. They were driven by local needs to create a Christian identity. Apart from the notorious lynching of Hypatia, attacks concentrated mainly on buildings and statues. In some ways, buildings were more dangerous than persons. Their quiet, seemingly immovable presence, in full view of all, stood for the bonds of shared "cultural stuff" which needed to be severed by violent acts. To attack a statue or a temple was to cancel its subliminal presence, by suddenly charging it with negative religious meaning. The very care with which Christians in Egypt mutilated the images of the gods on the walls of the great Pharaonic temples – by carefully hacking away the feet, hands, ears, and eyes of the gods – showed that this was not the work of indiscriminate fanatics. It was the premeditated, fratricidal mutilation of a religion beside which many Christians had grown up and to which many of them still felt only too close.[95]

Once such destructions had occurred, they became history. The destruction of temples showed, in the most palpable manner possible, the predestined triumph of the church. In Gerasa (modern Jerash, in Jordan) despoiled fragments of the great pagan temple of Artemis were deliberately arranged in the neighboring church of Saint Theodore as if in a theme park. Christian worshippers who entered the church could see with their own eyes "representations of a disfigured past" put in place so as to enhance the success of a "sanctified present."[96]

These acts of violence had a long history ahead of them. Described by church historians of the fifth century, narratives of the destruction of pagan shrines in the Roman empire carried all over Europe the memory of an imagined heroic age of conflict and triumph. By 1000 A.D. these narratives had

reached up the coast of Norway as far as the Arctic circle. The description by Olaf Tryggvasson of the destruction (in around 995) of the great pagan shrine of Maere, in the Trondelag, as retold in Icelandic sagas, was based on the triumphant account of the destruction of the Serapeum of Alexandria some seven centuries earlier (in 392).[97]

Barbarian Identity: Re-Fashioning the Past

Last but not least, a community's sense of identity depends, to a very great extent, on its ability to talk itself into accepting historical narratives that link members of the present-day community to their imagined, "primordial" past. The study of the "barbarians" of Europe has shown this to be a major preoccupation of each group. As we have seen, in chapter 4 and elsewhere, most groups of barbarians emerged from nondescript beginnings. They did not carry ready-made ethnic identities with them when they crossed the Roman frontier. As a result, Franks, Goths, Anglo-Saxons, and many like them spent the next few centuries persuading themselves and others that they were they: each was a glorious group; each had a long history. Franks claimed to be descended from the ancient Trojans. Saxons claimed to have crossed the North Sea to Britain, their promised land, in only three boats. Successive nomadic confederacies that arose on the plains north of the Danube spoke of themselves as "children of the Huns." All of these primordial moments (lovingly situated somewhere "out there" – in the woods of Germany, along the coast of Jutland or on the Eurasian steppes) were the creation of men of the pen, seated comfortably in royal courts and monasteries in the heart of long-settled regions of Europe.[98]

Nor was the urge to define oneself in terms of links with a vivid past limited to barbarian Europe. As we have seen, the Muslims of the Middle East rapidly came to wrap themselves in a skein of plausible narratives, that justified their conquests to the local populations and that placed the origins of Islam itself in an exclusively Arabian environment. Whether in Europe or in the Middle East, what we now call "the barbarian identity" grew from such historical sleights of hand.[99] These histories are among the greatest creations of the early medieval period.

What is particularly exciting about the surge of history writing which characterized this period is that the relative abundance of surviving manuscripts from late Merovingian and Carolingian Europe enables us to follow the use of historical narratives to affirm ethnic identity, as these narratives changed over the centuries. To take only one striking example: The pioneering work of Helmut Reimitz on the rewriting of the *Histories* of Gregory of

Tours by later generations of Franks enables us to trace the process of "identity building" almost as closely as if we were reading over the shoulders of the scribes. Reimitz has laid out, with the meticulous care of a scientist describing an experiment in genetic engineering, the ways in which later writers borrowed from Gregory, censored him, and added to him – leaving out some passages, adding new narratives, thereby changing the original historical horizons of the work. As a result, we see the worldview of a late, late Roman of the sixth century changing under our eyes, as subsequent writers attempted to do justice to other views of Frankish history and of Frankish identity. Reimitz shows that what constituted being a Frank had been fiercely contested in different regions and in different social milieux. What we are accustomed to take as a firm "ethnic identity" has a vivid history of its own. It was the fruit of urgent and intelligent debates, which linked the last days of Rome, in an almost continuous conversation, to the empire of Charlemagne.[100]

History and Christian Identity

It has become normal among scholars to approach barbarian identity in this way. It is less usual to apply such an approach to the largest, and the most diverse, community in late antique and early medieval Europe – that is, to the Christian church. But, as we have seen, the same processes of identity formation were at work: primordial heroes, carefully exploited situations of conflict, the constant task of urging Christians to remember who they were. As with the barbarians, the definition of what constituted a Christian changed from generation to generation. As we see in many chapters – in chapter 6 and again in chapters 18 and 19 – Christian preachers, missionaries, and rulers kept on moving the goalposts as to what constituted a good Christian. A practice which one generation had accepted as harmless was often denounced as a "pagan survival" in the next. Only too often, what is presented as the evangelization of a "pagan" region turns out to be the "correction" of a previous, more relaxed (but by no means more pagan) form of Christianity.[101]

Furthermore, throughout Europe and Asia, Christians turned to history to trace the "numinous affinity" that preserved their identity by linking them to their own primordial past. They did it in very different ways. Syriac writers from the Nestorian Church of the East experimented with ways of writing about their church in a manner freed, at last, from empire. Romans, Persians, and Arabs might come and go: but the traditions laid down by great teachers and hierarchs continued. They spread like ground ivy

throughout the vast distances of Asia.[102] For East Romans, by contrast, empire was central to the expansion of the faith. The idea that a pagan could become a Christian without being implicated, somehow, in the Empire remained puzzling to Byzantines.[103] In the West, saints and bishops held the foreground for centuries, until the Venerable Bede, by exploiting the analogy between the kingdom of Israel and his own times, gave a unity to the history of the Saxons in Britain. He portrayed them as a new Israel, come to their Promised Land.

The Fate of the Secular

These problems of identity and their solution have rightly preoccupied recent scholars. But a final blunt question must be posed: how engulfing was the Christian identity created by these writings? I think that the answer to this is – not as much as one might expect. This does not mean that Europe remained pagan. Rather, the Christian identity proposed by the heroes and boundary-keepers of the church still had to compete with a strong streak of secular values that remained soundproof to Christianity. The "structural reserve" of the profane was not entirely obliterated by the triumph of the church.

This is not what we had thought. My friend, the late Robert Markus, had traced, in his lucid book, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, what he saw as a drastic process of the evaporation of secular, neutral values in the two centuries which separated Augustine from Gregory the Great.[104] Our own, contemporary preoccupations concerning the erosion of secular values in America, Europe, and the Middle East have made us eager to learn whether a similar process had occurred in the distant past, in Europe after Rome. In his deeply felt book, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City*, Wolfgang Liebeschuetz shared Markus' viewpoint: "the desecularization of social life [is] one of the most extraordinary features of Christianization in Late Antiquity."[105]

But it may not be as simple as that. Developments in the Christian intellectual elite may not have had repercussions in society at large. Recent studies of the relation between sacred and profane in late antiquity show that the evolution of public life in this period was not a clear-cut zero-sum game, in which more Christianity automatically led to less secular joys and institutions.[106] The brilliant study of Gilbert Dagron on the Hippodrome of Constantinople shows that this was not true in the East Roman empire.[107] Outside a small circle of intellectuals, the West may not have been so very different. As late as 577, king Chilperic of Neustria built circuses at Soissons and Paris: "for he was keen to offer spectacles to the citizens."[108]

In Rome itself, secular jollifications of pre-Christian origin continued. The popes did little about such things.[109] A late antique laissez faire, that left a breathing space for the things of the *saeculum*, survived into the eighth century, to shock straitlaced visitors from the mission-fields of the North, such as Boniface.

Altogether, the cities of Christianized Europe were less claustrophobic than we might think. Profane institutions continued. Not every city was controlled by powerful bishops of noble background. Bishops still had to deal with resolutely profane figures of authority – tax collectors and the leaders of the militias of the cities.[110] In many regions, secular traditions of Roman law were maintained, as were procedures for the transfer and registration of property, which still passed through the city council without reference to the church.[111]

Jews and Christians

But perhaps the clearest proof of the maintenance of secular traditions comes from an unexpected direction: the treatment of the Jews in sixth-century Italy and Gaul. As Bruno Dumézil has shown, in an admirably differentiated study of the limits of religious freedom in the early Middle Ages, Roman law guaranteed protection for Jewish communities. A note appended by a Visigothic lawyer to a collection of Roman laws was firm: "All Jews are Romans." They enjoyed the freedom of Roman citizens to practice their religion. Judaism was a *religio licita* – a religion licensed to exist.[112]

To be licensed to exist was not necessarily a license to be loved in an increasingly Christian world. But, despite a few incidents of mob violence led by bishops, the secular tradition held firm. Dumézil shows that many bishops were anxious to maintain the Roman laws that protected Jews. Hence a surprising situation. The one figure who is believed to have done most to drain the secular from Christian discourse – pope Gregory the Great – was the same pope who was most insistent on ensuring that the secular laws which guaranteed freedom of worship to Jews were strictly observed. When the bishop of Palermo tried to take over the Jewish synagogues in his city, Gregory first sent the bishop a book of Roman law. Then Gregory made him return the Torah scrolls to the Jewish leaders. He also made the bishop offer compensation for the loss of property.[113] As Dumézil goes on to show, it was only in Visigothic Spain, in the seventh century, that the Roman laws that had protected the Jews were brushed aside, in a hubristic attempt by king Sisebut (612–621) to include all subjects of the Visigothic kings in a single, sacralized commonwealth. It was only then – and only in Spain – that the barrier of the secular

laws, which protected Jews from Christians, was pushed aside, and, with it, an ancient vision of a society with room for more than one religion.[114]

However, identity formation – whether religious or ethnic – was never total. In 839 A.D., Bodo, a learned deacon at the court of Louis the Pious, unexpectedly converted to Judaism. He had himself circumcised, grew a beard, and let his hair grow long – a pointed reversal of his privileged clerical status. Fleeing to Muslim Spain, he engaged in disputes with the local Christians.[115] He pointed out that they should not flatter themselves on the present low status of the Jews in Christian lands. Conditions could change. Had not the temples of paganism once been magnificent? They had vanished. Maybe Christianity would one day suffer the same fate. In any case, he remembered Christians at the strenuously Catholic court of Louis the Pious. Of fourteen learned friends known to him, each held a different opinion about the Christian faith.[116]

Silent Changes

A salutary sense of the fluidity of Christian identity makes it easier to write the *Rise of Western Christendom* as the history of a religion that changed throughout the centuries. As I have made plain in this preface, I have gone out of my way to argue that the history of the rise of Christianity should not be reduced to a history of the Church – as if it was a single, monolithic structure, proceeding at a brisk pace along the main highway of history to its eventual triumph in the West.

But this is easier said than done. For once one abandons the main highway, familiar landmarks vanish. A silence falls. The vivid writers, the vehement controversies, the grand councils, whose rousing noise of battle fills so many volumes of the surviving evidence, drop away. So do the lists of dates, which pin persons and events securely onto the map of history. For (as we have seen in the case of the slow emergence of the Christian cemetery) some of the most decisive changes in the history of Christianity do not follow the brisk pace of conventional narratives of ecclesiastical or political history.

Faced by such slow and silent changes, we have to revise our own criteria for historical achievement. We like clearly recognizable high points. We like great books, great works of art, great feats of organization, splendid battles. When they happen in any period, we line them up, like football trophies on a mantelpiece. Our conventional account of the history of Europe is studded with such moments. On these criteria, the period of the early Middle Ages lets us down. It wins few trophies. It is usually presented as a trough in the history of Europe, brought about by the fall of Rome.

In order to counter this widespread judgment, we have to insist on other criteria of excellence. We need to appreciate the achievement involved in the creation and maintenance of the infrastructures of culture, as they settled down, all over Europe and the Middle East, to a long, slow pace that would eventually join classical antiquity to the Middle Ages. We need to appreciate the enrichment that came from the successful preservation of learned traditions. We need to become alert to the creativity of scribes and commentators, as they discreetly performed daring feats of reinterpretation in the very act of seeming to pass down revered traditions. Above all, we need to admire the skill and the sense of purpose with which major early medieval writers distilled the exuberant Christian literature of an earlier age into the clear honey of spiritual guidance, and into nourishment with which to face death and the journey of the soul.

The Seventh Century: Change and Renewal

For this reason, I fastened with particular interest on the seventh century (especially in chapters 9 through 11). For this century marks a watershed in western Christianity. Features that we have come to associate with western Christianity in all future ages – such as cemeteries, large monasteries, and a growing concern with the otherworldly perils of the soul – become visible in this period. None of these changes were linked to dramatic events. Largely hidden processes had brought them to the fore.

To take a few examples: Up to the seventh century, the monastic movement, though already vigorous, still lacked the physical profile that it would have in all later times. Christians such as John Cassian had written abundantly about what it was like to be a monk.[117] But it was only in the seventh century that these texts found concrete expression in a distinctive "monastic" architecture.[118] It was only slowly, over a long arc of time (which began in fifth-century Provence and ended in seventh-century Ireland), that the relaxed interplay between teacher and pupils, such as was common in late Roman literary circles, gradually crystallized into the intense relationship of a monastic *sapiens* – a figure of spiritual wisdom – and his disciples.[119] It was also only around this time that the Latin language, which had been universal throughout almost all the West, developed into dialects that were no longer mutually intelligible, thereby leading to the eventual birth of French, Spanish, Italian, and the other Romance languages.[120]

What we have come to appreciate through recent scholarship is that these crucial changes, which occurred after 600 A.D., did not happen at a social and political nadir in the history of Europe. The work of Chris Wickham and

of Jairus Banaji has made us aware that in the seventh century northern Gaul, the heartland of the Merovingian kingdom, was one of the richest areas in Europe. By regaining control of their peasants, after the great convulsion of the fifth century, the leading families of *Francia* emerged as "the first truly medieval nobilities of Europe."[121] The new growth of monasticism and of a new Christian piety emerged from a background of economic renewal.

This rallying comes as a surprise. It contradicts conventional narratives of Dark Age history. It is usually assumed that, after Rome, all western society, in all regions, went downhill. By the seventh century, the barbarian kingdoms were thought to have reached rock bottom. It was believed that the Merovingian kingdom, in particular, had been caught in a downward spiral of violence. In fact, what we find is a solid polity. Recent studies of the hagiography and political history of the later Merovingians reveal that royal assemblies acted as forums for debates on the nature of kingship, and on the relations between kings, nobles, and people. These debates look forward directly to the high seriousness of the Carolingians.[122] It is not true that Charlemagne pulled Europe out of the deep crater made by the barbarian invasions and the fall of Rome. His achievements were based on a solid foundation of prosperity and a desire for responsible government that had already been laid down by his Merovingian predecessors.

A History of Heaven and Earth

But the history of late antique and early medieval Christianity has room for other themes. I trust that readers will find them also in this book. For instance, there is room for a history of the Christian imagination as it changed from century to century and from region to region. For, in the history of a religion, shifts in the basic building blocks that structure the imaginative world of believers are more significant, in the long run, than are changes in dogma. For shifts in the area of the religious imagination point the way to profounder changes in worldview and in religious practice. So let me conclude with a brief example of how one might write one chapter, at least, in the history of the Christian imagination in East and West: the shifting of the boundary between heaven and earth.

We cannot understand the tenacity of paganism if we do not realize the sense of warmth and intimacy which pagans experienced as they worshipped their many gods. These gods crowded into the huge gap between heaven and earth, filling it with energy and life. The gods bridged heaven and earth. Their rustling, benevolent presences filled the physical world. They hovered close to human beings, ready to answer their prayers. They reached down

yet further to touch the natural world. Every year the gods breathed abundance into the earth, infusing it with their own unflagging energy.

To answer paganism, it was never enough to close the temples and to write great books refuting pagan belief. Christians had to re-draw the map of the universe. Having brusquely dismissed the intermediary gods of paganism as demons, they had to find some other way to close the gap that had opened again between heaven and earth. We cannot understand the passion with which the Christian churches of the eastern provinces of the Roman empire engaged in what are known to church historians as the "Christological controversies" of the fourth and fifth centuries, unless we realize the weight of this underlying anxiety. Were heaven and earth still distant? Had God, as Christ, come down fully to earth? Had he truly identified himself with human beings, so as to reach out and heal their sufferings? Or had he merely brushed the earth with his presence, as an emperor might appear – on rare occasions – from his exalted palace?

The conflicting Christian parties, whose maneuvers we describe at the end of chapter 4, and in chapters 7 and 12, were drawn together by the great fear of a drifting apart of heaven and earth, of God and humanity. For if this joining was not asserted in the correct manner, the gap which opened up between God and humanity might reappear. They were dismayed at this prospect. For it reminded them of other, fateful gaps in their own society – between rich and poor, emperor and subjects. If God had not truly bent down to listen to humankind, by sharing human nature, why should the rich and powerful bother to bend down to listen to those who called upon them for help and mercy? Thus, what we call the "Christological controversies" were always more than rarefied disputes. They involved a muffled debate, conducted by an entire society marked by sharp social differences, on the nature of its own cohesion.[123]

If we turn to the West, we find that the imaginative agenda had changed. The high-pitched anxiety about the joining of heaven and earth, emperor and subjects, rich and poor, which stirred East Romans, was less prominent. What we meet instead, in chapter 6, in the world of Gregory of Tours, was a more low-key but equally urgent concern: how to recover the charge of divine energy that had once pulsed through the natural world, bringing abundance to the crops and healing to the human body. Gregory's answer concentrated on the "presence" of the saints. The miracles that happened at their shrines proved that the long-dead saints still moved among the living. They reassured him that the link between heaven and earth had not been broken. The prayers of the saints would move God to look favorably on those who resorted to their tombs, as a powerful patron might bring the petitions of his client to a king.

But it was not only a matter of prayers. The saints joined heaven and earth in a more intimate manner. They brought down to earth a touch of the abundance and healing scent of the Paradise in which they lived. Gregory's world was a world of unearthly smells. These were heavy breaths of Paradise, which gave vigor to the sick and abundance to the countryside. *Scenting Salvation* (the title of a beautiful study by Susan Harvey) was what the cult of saints was all about.[124]

The belief that Paradise lay close to humanity was shared by all late antique Christians. But Gregory's sense of the presence of the saints and of the closeness of Paradise was remarkable. It proved to be the last flowering, in the West, of an ancient Christianity. This Christianity had continued to think of the human race as deeply embedded in a universe shot through with living presences. Only a thin veil separated humans from the heavy, healing scent of Paradise to which the saints had passed.

What seems to have happened in subsequent centuries, in the West, was that earth and heaven drifted apart. Paradise was there. But it became more distant. It came to be thought of as a place far beyond this world. Only in the case of special saints did Paradise come close to earth – in sudden bursts of light and perfume to dispel the night of their death. For the average believer, the way to Paradise had become daunting. The soul made its way with difficulty to that distant hall of light. Seventh-century visions came to portray the passing of the soul as a long and perilous journey of the soul through a dark world haunted by demonic hosts.

The churches of the sixth and seventh centuries were echoes of that distant hall above the stars. They were places of *Dynamic Splendor* (to use the title of the book of Ann Terry and Henry Maguire on the refulgent gold mosaics of the basilica of Poreč in Croatia).[125] They were filled with lamps that burned perpetually before the tombs of those whose souls were thought to have reached the faraway light of Paradise.

This was no longer a Paradise that lay close to earth, as it had done in the world of Gregory. In subsequent centuries of the early Middle Ages, the families of leading members of society in Poreč – city worthies and the clergy – scraped the names of the deceased on the benches of the apse of the light-filled basilica. They did so in order to place the names of the dead as close as possible to the altar. For it was at the altar that prayers were said at Mass for their souls. It was the altar, and the priest who stood at the altar, that now joined heaven and earth.[126]

We can leave the story of the joining of heaven and earth with the great debate between the Byzantine church and the scholars at the court of Charlemagne on the role of icons in Christian worship, which I describe in chapter 17 and at the end of chapter 19. The Byzantine Iconoclast

Controversy has been the subject of two masterpieces – *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era* by Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon,[127] and *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* by Thomas Noble.[128]

Looking at this debate we can sense a parting of the ways between two Christendoms. In Byzantium, the worship of icons rested on an unchanged belief that, somehow, heaven and earth were not too far apart. Material objects could still point the way from earth to heaven, leading the believer "by the hand," along a gentle slope that somehow joined the material to the spiritual world. Icons were heavy with the "presence" of the figures that they represented. In their icons, Christ, Mary, and the saints still stood among the faithful on earth.

The scholars around Charlemagne were now less certain. They had come to live in a world where heaven and earth no longer mingled with such ease. Only great sacral objects, guarded in the churches by the clergy – the Eucharist, the Scriptures, and the tombs of the saints – were the points where heaven and earth could be imagined to meet. The rest was profane. An abyss separated all profane things from heaven. The sense of a universe effortlessly suffused with divine powers, which had once comforted pagans, Jews, and Christians (if each in their different way), had finally evaporated in the West. In that sense, the reign of Charlemagne witnessed more than the foundation of a short-lived western empire. It coincided with the end of a very ancient world.

I trust that a sense of the joy which I have experienced in writing a story such as this will be apparent to the readers of this book. I also wish that they will share with me my gratitude to the authors of these vivid new publications – a selection only from a single, remarkable decade of scholarship. With these publications in hand, I hope that we can all go forward together, to explore a period which was a crucial moment in the history of Europe, and which may have something to say (from the distance of a very ancient Christianity, very different from our own) to our own times.

Notes

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Introduction

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