CHAPTER 1

Introduction

> Do not conform to the world around you, but be transformed by your new way of thinking, so that you find out what is God's will.
>
> (Paul of Tarsus, Romans 12.2, mid-first century)

> Christians do not differ from other people in where they live, or how they talk, or in their lifestyle. They do not live in private cities, or speak a special language, or follow a peculiar way of life. Their doctrine is not an invention of inquisitive and restless thinkers; they do not champion human assertions as some people do. They live where they happen to live, in Greek or foreign cities, they follow local custom in clothing and food and daily life, yet their citizenship is of a remarkable kind. They live in their own homelands, but as resident foreigners. They share everything as citizens, and put up with everything as foreigners.
>
> (*Letter to Diognetus*, author unknown, second century)

> So this heavenly city, while living in exile on earth, summons citizens from every nation and collects a society of foreigners who speak every language; it is not concerned for what is different in the customs, laws and institutions by which earthly peace is sought or maintained. The city does not rescind or destroy any of these, but preserves and observes everything, different though it may be in different nations, that tends to one and the same end, that is, earthly peace, and that does not obstruct the religion which teaches worship of one true and highest God.
>
> (Augustine, *City of God* 19.17)

How did a tiny, politically suspect, religious splinter group become the dominant religion of the Roman world? This is one of the great historical questions, for Christianity was part of the Roman legacy to medieval Europe, and Europeans took Christianity far beyond the limits of the Roman empire. At the start of the third millennium, Christianity is still a major world-wide religion. But in the secular British university system, the majority of students have no religious commitment, and are aware that

their education in a pluralist 'post-Christian' society has told them very little about what it might mean to call oneself Christian. The questions that students ask have shaped this book. As the quotations at the head of this chapter show, the first Christians were Romans, in the sense that they lived in the Roman empire and had a more or less close relationship, depending on their local culture and language, with the dominant Roman culture. From 212 all free inhabitants of the empire were formally Roman citizens, subject in principle, but with variations in practice, to Roman law and taxation and religious obligations. So when Christianity began, just how different was it from the other religious options of the Roman world, that is, the world ruled by Rome and formed by the cultures of Greece and Rome? Did Christianity change the world, or did Roman institutions and ways of thinking shape Christianity?

But what is meant by 'Christianity'? The simple answer is that Christians live by the teachings of Jesus Christ, but they have interpreted those teachings in many ways. How can other people identify a Christian? Does 'being Christian' depend on behaviour, such as forgiveness and active charity; or on religious practice, such as churchgoing; or on personal religious experience, such as prayer; or on acknowledging the authority of specific texts, or belief-statements, or church leaders, in understanding the relationship of human beings to God? Was Christianity always, as it so painfully is in some parts of today's world, a matter of identifying with one group and rejecting or fighting others? Is Christianity at the start of the third millennium still shaped by ethics and theology, social assumptions and traditions, cultural and political divisions inherited from the Roman world in which it began? This introductory chapter briefly surveys the relationship of Christianity to Roman society, and changing perspectives on that relationship in later historical writing. The chapters that follow develop some of the most important themes.

Chapter 2, 'Christians and others', investigates the problem of sources and the distinctions that historians have inherited from early Christian writings: Christians and pagans, Christians and Jews, Christians and heretics. Most of the sources for early Christianity have survived because they were acceptable to the Christians whose theology prevailed. How then can we reconstruct the perspective of people who thought they were Christians but whose theology was classed as heresy, or of people who were not Christians, or of the silent majority who did not write about their beliefs? Were the distinctions so clear in practice? Were Christians and non-Christians divided only by misunderstanding and polemic, or were

there fundamental differences of beliefs and values? Did Christian groups offer an alternative family, a level of emotional and practical support, or of moral and religious teaching, that was not available in other religious options? Why would anyone choose the one religious option that carried the risk of an appalling public death?

Chapter 3, 'The blood of the martyrs', asks why, and to what extent, Romans persecuted Christians, and how the penalties inflicted by Roman law shaped the identity of the church. How did non-Christian Romans react to the deaths of martyrs, and how did Christians reinterpret those deaths? How did fragments of dead bodies become holy and powerful relics? What happened to the ideal of martyrdom after persecution ended in the early fourth century?

Chapter 4, 'Body and soul', considers the impact of martyrdom, and of philosophical tradition, on early Christian teaching about the body. Why did (some) Christians reject the ties of family and society, and why did they argue that the best kind of Christian was a celibate living in austerity or even deprivation? Why did Christians develop single-sex communities for men and, uniquely in Roman society, for women? How far did Christian asceticism differ from philosophical asceticism, in ways of living and in ways of thinking about oneself?

Chapter 5, 'People of the Book', considers the impact of a shared sacred text, namely Jewish scripture with the addition of selected (and disputed) Christian texts. What difference did it make that Christians had such a text? Could anyone come to church and hear regular religious and moral teaching, sometimes from highly educated preachers? Was this a unique opportunity in Roman culture, or was it one aspect of a general concern for texts? Could Christianity have been incorporated into the range of religious wisdom on offer in the Roman world?

Chapter 6, 'Triumph, disaster or adaptation?', focuses on the fourth and early fifth centuries. At the start of the fourth century Christianity was a persecuted religion; by the start of the fifth century it was the only approved religion. How did the extraordinary become the ordinary? Was there already little to choose between Christianity and Roman society, or did Christianity adapt its teachings to a new social role? Did Christians persecute in their turn, oppressing Jews, heretics and pagans, or had pagans already lost commitment to traditional religion? Did Christian charity make the invisible poor visible, or did Christian bishops appropriate the role and the prestige of local patrons? Is this the end of Roman society, of authentic Christianity, of both or of neither?

BEGINNINGS

Jesus of Nazareth, known to his followers as Jesus Christ, was born in the reign of Augustus, the first Roman emperor, in an obscure district of the Roman-ruled territory then called Judaea. The precise date of his birth is uncertain, but it was not far off the year now called AD 1, the starting-point of the Christian calendar.[1] *Iudaea* is Latin for 'Jewish' (land or province): Jesus and many of his first followers were Jews, a fact often disregarded until the mid-twentieth century. These first followers are called disciples, from Latin *discipulus*, 'student'; this is one example among many of Christian vocabulary derived from the Greek and Latin of early Christian texts. Jesus also taught people who were not Jews, for the population of Judaea was ethnically and religiously diverse. Judaea was not an important base for Roman legions, and its Roman governor was not of the highest rank. It had some garrisons of auxiliary troops, mostly local recruits, and paid taxes to the Roman government. Some of its inhabitants accepted this as they had accepted other foreign rulers, some found it politically and religiously unacceptable.[2]

At about the age of thirty, in or near the year 33, Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem, on the orders of Pontius Pilatus, the governor appointed by Augustus' successor Tiberius. He was tied to a wooden cross, secured by nails driven through wrists and ankles, and left to die – of thirst, exposure or heart failure, depending on the conditions and his physical strength. Roman law authorised this cruel form of execution, but it was usually reserved for slaves and rebels. Jesus may have been accused of rebellion. According to his followers, he was crucified between two *leistai* (Mark 15.27). This word is traditionally translated 'thieves', but it often implied the kind of outlaws who are called freedom fighters by their friends and bandits, or terrorists, by their enemies (Schwartz 2001: 89–81). The followers of Jesus said that the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, condemned him for blasphemy, and also accused him of subversion (Luke 22.66–23.5). The notice on his cross (John 19.20) identified him as Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews, and was written in Latin, Greek and Hebrew,[3] the three official languages of the region. His followers believed that he was the Messiah, God's anointed: in

[1] Dionysius Exiguus, a monk from Scythia (South Russia), calculated this date in the sixth century. AD stands for *anno domini*, Latin for 'in the year of the Lord'; CE, 'Common Era' (see below), is a widely used alternative.

[2] Fredriksen 2000 for Judaea in the time of Jesus; Schwartz 2001 for Jewish society over a longer period; Rajak 2001 for Jewish relationships with Greek and Roman culture.

[3] This probably means the local language, Aramaic, not the classical Hebrew of the Jewish scriptures.

Greek, *christos*. In Jewish tradition, anointing with oil symbolised kingship, and prophecies foretold the Messiah, but there were many interpretations of when he would come and what he would do. From the earliest Christian writings (perhaps as early as the mid-first century) to the present day, Christians have tried to find ways of expressing who Jesus was, what was his relationship to God whom he called 'Father', and what it means for the relationship of all human beings to God.[4]

Roman law executed Jesus, and Christians had to contend with the argument that they worshipped a crucified man, a human being who had been condemned to one of the cruellest and most degrading penalties of Roman law. But the Roman authorities did not hunt down his followers, and Christian missionaries spread their teachings throughout the Mediterranean world with the help of Roman roads, Roman imperial control, and Roman acceptance of religious diversity. The Roman empire, in the early centuries CE, made no attempt to establish a universal cult or sacred text or priesthood or belief-statement: nor did it repress cults, unless they offended against Roman religious feeling (most obviously by human sacrifice, ch. 2) or against public order. Emperors, living and dead, were variously honoured in association with gods, but there was no empire-wide 'imperial cult' with a system of priesthood and ritual (Beard–North–Price 1998: 1.348–63). Instead of integrated universal cults, there were 'family resemblances' of cult practice: animal sacrifice at altars, land or buildings sacred to the god, cult-images and offerings. It was relatively easy to identify a local deity, such as Sul in Britain or Bel in Palmyra, with one of the widely recognised Roman gods.

Cities had local traditions about the cults that the gods required them to maintain; modern writers call these 'civic' cults. Local benefactors funded the rituals and sacred places of these cults, and were often rewarded with the honour of priesthood. The duties of a priest might be no more than an annual sacrifice, perhaps with a brief preliminary abstinence from sex or from certain foods. Very few priesthoods required a change in lifestyle. People who did not hold priesthoods had no formal religious obligations, though their neighbours might think them anti-social if they did not take part in the festivals that honoured their local deities. If they wished, they could also follow one or more of the 'elective' cults ('elective' is another useful modern term) that were maintained by groups of worshippers. In most cases, it would be difficult to tell that someone belonged to such a

[4] Fredriksen 2000 discusses early Christian interpretations in their historical and religious context; Ward 2000 surveys interpretations of core Christian beliefs.

cult, unless he or she was seen at a place of worship of an unfamiliar god, taking part in a ceremony, revering an image, or, sometimes, observing specific rules of lifestyle.

Judaism was a special case, both because of its monotheism and because it is an ethnic as well as a religious category. Jewish monotheism, that is, belief that there is one and only one god, was not compatible with traditional religion or with 'divine honours' for emperors, and the customs derived from Jewish scripture marked Jews as different from others. Some Romans thought that male circumcision was genital mutilation, and many were puzzled by refusal to eat pork, the cheapest available meat. There were bizarre stories about the jealous Jewish god who insisted on these customs, required sacrifice only at his temple in Jerusalem, and would not allow his worshippers to acknowledge other gods (Rives 1995). Judaism was also exceptional in providing a religious motive for rebellion, against the control of Jewish territory by idolatrous Romans. Jews who lived elsewhere, but sent money for the upkeep of the Jerusalem Temple, were sometimes suspected not just of divided loyalties, but of financing rebellion. But there were also positive responses to Judaism. Romans who were interested in philosophy respected Jews for their monotheism, their refusal to make images of their god, and their adherence to their ancient law. Jews offered sacrifice, even if it was only to one god and at one temple, for as long as the Temple stood, and they were willing to offer sacrifice for the well-being of the emperor. Even when Jews faced social discrimination, or outright hostility, they could claim that Roman law permitted their meetings for worship, and that their forms of worship, including their study of ancient sacred texts, were recognisable as religion or as philosophy (ch. 2, ch. 5).

Christianity benefited from Roman tolerance of Judaism, for early Christian groups, according to Christian texts, often began in Jewish synagogues (Greek *sunagōgē*, 'meeting-place') or among the gentile sympathisers that Jews called 'godfearers' (J. Lieu 2002: 31–68). This may be one reason why there was no systematic attempt to eliminate Christians before the mid-third century. Nevertheless, for three centuries Christians were at risk. The risk was statistically small, but they could be executed, sometimes with appalling but entirely legal cruelty, for their refusal to worship the gods of the empire. Roman law imposed a particular form of martyrdom, that is, dying for one's beliefs, that became part of Christian self-understanding, and was commemorated as the church's history of heroism (ch. 3).

In the early fourth century, the Roman emperor Constantine ended this danger and gave the Christian church his official support and funding

(ch. 6). Thereafter, emperors were involved in debates about which Christians were orthodox (ch. 2) and deserved their support. Constantine also gave Christian bishops (Greek *episkopos*, 'supervisor') a recognised role in local administration of law. The church became an alternative career for people who could otherwise have entered the imperial service, and the pastoral work of a bishop, as leader of a church community, came to include the settlement of legal disputes and negotiation with civic and imperial authorities. Christian concern for the poor prompted building programmes, administrative systems, and legislation on charitable bequests and institutions. Church buildings, and church organisation, show how Roman civic culture contributed to the vocabulary and the practices of the church. Early Christian groups met in private houses, and no church building earlier than the mid-third century has yet been identified (White 1990). Many of the church buildings funded by Constantine, and by other fourth-century Christian patrons, were basilicas, large rectangular halls with a platform at one end. This was the all-purpose official building: 'basilica' means literally 'royal', from Greek *basilikos*. The emperor or his deputy presided in a basilica that was a courtroom, for policy-making or for trials. The bishop or his deputy presided in a church; a professor or his deputy presided in a lecture-room. Emperor, bishop or professor sat in a high-backed chair, *cathedra*, on the raised platform. (That is why professors have chairs, and why some churches are cathedrals.) The bishop taught his congregation like a professor (ch. 5), and took responsibility for his diocese, another term from Roman administration: *dioikēsis* is Greek for an administrative region. Similarly, 'parish' comes from Greek *paroikia*, 'neighbourhood', and 'vicar' from Latin *vicarius*, 'deputy'.

The values of Roman civic culture shaped the lives even of those Christians, known as ascetics (from Greek *askēsis*, 'training'), who expressed their total commitment to God by rejecting those values and devoting themselves to an austere life of prayer and study of the Bible. Their form of asceticism was influenced by philosophical teaching (ch. 4). Educated Christian preachers used the traditions of classical philosophy and literature to interpret the Christian scriptures (ch. 5). By the late fourth century Roman law had established Christianity as the authorised religion of the empire, and people who were classified as pagans, Jews and heretics came under increasing pressure to conform (ch. 6). In the western half of the Roman empire, when imperial government collapsed in the late fifth century, it was the church that preserved and transmitted Latin language and literature, Graeco-Roman philosophical theology, and Roman administrative structures.

No wonder, then, that many Christian writers in the early centuries CE interpreted the Roman empire as part of God's purpose for the world (Markus 1988: 47–51). Jesus Christ was born in the reign of Augustus, who united the Roman empire. The territory controlled by Rome, at its greatest extent, stretched from Scotland to the Sudan and from Spain to Mesopotamia. This was the biggest and the longest-lasting empire known to western history, and it shaped the later history of Europe and the Mediterranean world. Two thousand years after the birth of Christ, Christian texts, theology, organisation and ritual are still bearers of Roman tradition, and the church powerfully influenced the way in which Roman tradition was transmitted to post-Roman cultures. Many Christians still regard as authoritative the decisions and interpretations and belief-statements made by Christians who lived in the Roman empire. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this has been most obvious in debates on questions of gender and sexuality: whether women can be validly ordained as priests, whether priests must be celibate, whether extra-marital relationships are wrong, whether homosexual relationships are wrong (ch. 4). There are also debates about the content of the creeds (Latin *credo*, 'I believe'), the statements of Christian belief that were formulated in the fourth and fifth centuries (Young 1983, Wickham 1997). Two church councils, Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451) were especially influential in this process, but there was strong dissent from both. Moreover, their discussion was framed by the philosophical debates of the time, and many present-day theologians find this unhelpful. For non-Christian students of Roman history, and indeed for some Christians, early Christian theology and practice can be very puzzling. This is a historian's, not a theologian's, book, but historical context can often help to explain.

DIFFERENCES

Christians did not share in Roman religious practice, because they thought that Romans worshipped idols, images of false or even demonic gods. Greek has two words for images, with different implications. 'Idol' comes from Greek *eidōlon*, which usually means a deceptive or shadowy image of reality, like the shades in Homer's account of the Underworld. 'Icon', a religious image, comes from *eikōn*, 'likeness': some philosophers argued that an *eikōn* can be a likeness of reality, and some suggested that the gods were willing to inhabit an image that was made with reverence. Christians borrowed from philosophical critique of image-making to argue that cult-statues were idols: either they were nothing more than wood and stone, or, if they had power,

it was the power of the demons who had taken up residence there, attracted by the blood of animal sacrifice. Christians of course refused to sacrifice to idols; they also rejected Jewish sacrifice, because they interpreted the death of Christ as the perfect sacrifice and commemorated it in the central Christian ritual of the eucharist (ch. 2).

Christians also borrowed from philosophy to interpret their sacred texts, that is, the Jewish scriptures, together with a range of first-century Christian texts that came to be regarded as authoritative (ch. 5). Roman culture had many sacred texts, but none had a comparable role in shaping belief and practice (ch. 2, ch. 5). The Christian texts acquired the name 'New Testament' from a letter written by the Christian missionary Paul of Tarsus, formerly a strictly observant Jew (ch. 2), in the mid-first century. Paul said (2 Corinthians 3.6) that God had made a new agreement (Greek *diathēkē*) with his people. This word, which also means 'will' or 'disposition of property', was translated into Latin as *testamentum*. By the second century, if not sooner, Christians were calling Jewish scripture the Old Testament; many present-day theologians prefer to say 'Hebrew Bible', without the implication that Jewish scripture is outdated. The New Testament texts come from the first or, at the latest, the early second century. They show Jews varying in their assimilation to local cultures, and Christians varying in the extent to which they maintained or adopted Jewish practices, and in the extent to which they shared the culture and customs of the Roman empire.

These same texts often make sharp contrasts, between Christians and Jews and between Christians and 'Gentiles' or 'Greeks'. 'Gentile' is the Latin equivalent of Hebrew *goyim* (plural of the more familiar *goy*), 'the peoples' or 'the nations' who are not Jews. The Greek word for 'people' in this sense is *ethnos*, with the adjective *ethnikos* (cf. 'ethnic'); the Latin equivalent is *gens* with the adjective *gentilis*, hence 'Gentile'. Jews and Christians in Greek-speaking regions often referred to non-believers as 'the Greeks', even though they themselves spoke Greek. This raises interesting, and topical, questions about cultural identity: is it possible to share language and culture without sharing religion (ch. 5)? In the last half-century, social and religious change has prompted reassessment of the clear contrasts that are affirmed in early Christian texts and maintained in the pioneering church history of Eusebius.

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, began his *History of the Church* in the early fourth century, when Christians were undergoing the worst persecution they had ever known. His teacher Pamphilus, who died in this persecution, was a student of the great (and controversial) theologian

Origen, who died as a result of torture and imprisonment in the mid-third century (ch. 3). Eusebius too lived through atrocious persecution: his account of the martyrs of Palestine is among the most horrific in a horrific genre. He survived to see the transformation of his world by Constantine's support for Christianity.[5] He began his history as follows:

> My aim is to record in writing: the successions of the holy apostles, from our Saviour to our own times; what was done and when in the history of the church; its most distinguished leaders in the best-known regions; those who, in each generation, spread God's word in writing or without; and the names, number and age of those who, driven to the utmost error by their desire for innovation, have proclaimed themselves the bringers of so-called knowledge, and have set upon Christ's flock like savage wolves. Also: what has happened to the Jews from the moment of their conspiracy against our Saviour; what wars the gentiles fought, and when, against God's word; the martyrdoms of our own times; and our Saviour's gracious help in all.

Eusebius saw a continuous Christian tradition, exemplified by the transmission of authority from apostles to a succession of bishops,[6] and growing steadily from the earliest churches and missions. The tradition that he saw was clearly distinct from Judaism. It survived three centuries of state persecution, and even more dangerous internal threat from heretics. At last, in Eusebius' final book, Constantine ends persecution and Christianity becomes the dominant religion of the Roman empire.

This was Christian history written by the victors, who knew the triumphant end of the story. In later centuries, historians who followed the example of Eusebius focussed on the Church's own history within Roman society, and on its internal debates about doctrine and practice and organisation. They could assume readers who were Christians or who at least took a sympathetic interest in Christianity, and their attitude to other religions now provokes an amazement that shows how radically church history has changed (J. Lieu 2002: 69–70). Often they wrote with the aim of demonstrating that a particular Christian tradition was (the only one) true to the earliest churches. 'Church history' was thus separated from 'Roman history', which dealt with war and politics, though Roman historians would probably include a chapter on the rise of Christianity, and church historians

[5] On Eusebius, see T. Barnes 1981, Cameron and Hall 1999. His *Ecclesiastical History* is translated by Williamson 1989; and by Lawlor and Oulton 1927, with notes.

[6] Apostles (Greek *apostolos*, 'envoy') were the first Christian missionaries, commissioned (according to the Gospels) by Jesus himself. A bishop was the head of a church and later of a group of churches, appointed for life.