Introduction

This book is about success: about Christianity's rise to power and its growth over two millennia to become the largest religion in the world today. It is also about failure: about Christianity's loss of influence in modern times and the precipitous decline in churchgoing that has taken place in many parts of the west since the 1960s.

In order to understand these mixed fortunes this volume considers the development of Christianity over two thousand years. It focuses on the changing relations between Christianity and society and looks, in particular, at the ways in which Christianity has related to power. It considers how Christian institutions and individuals have understood, articulated and embodied power, and how they have related themselves to political, economic, cultural and military power. Above all, the book considers Christian history in terms of two competing models of power – power from on high and power from below – and the consequences of the churches' tendency to favour the former over the latter.

The volume is divided into two parts, with a hinge in the sixteenth century. The first traces the way in which Christianity in the pre-modern period established itself as a major power first in the near east and then, increasingly, in the west. It shows that its success was due in large part to the way in which the Catholic version of Christianity was able to adopt and embody power from on high and form alliances with secular powers operating according to the same model. For both, power was monarchial. It comes from above and is exemplified in the control exercised by the strong, who are few, over the weak, who are many. The

church laid claim to such power early on by representing it as the possession of a sovereign God who delegates it to his authorised representatives on earth: to bishops and clergy, emperors and kings. Rather than giving explicit legitimation to the exercise of arbitrary, tyrannical or despotic power, however, the church developed an ideology of rule that spoke of the godly exercise of dominating power in terms of the paternalistic care of the 'father' for his 'children'. It taught that a just, harmonious and ordered hierarchical society would be brought into being by general obedience to a loving heavenly Father and to his (male) deputies on earth – in government, church and home.

Yet the model of paternal-monarchial power was not the only one in the Christian repertoire. Right from the start it competed with an alternative model in which power was exemplified in the life of a 'Lord', Jesus Christ, who had lived and died in a way that overturned expectations of sovereign, dominating power. Rather than garner power for himself or exercise it over others, Jesus had tried to establish a 'kingdom' in which the mighty were cast down and the poor were exalted. The power of which he spoke was not a power of control over the many by the few, but the power of love between equals. After Christ's death and resurrection, this power was given to all who followed him through the gift of the Holy Spirit. As such, sacred power was understood not as the institutionalised and regulated power of the church, its clergy and the secular leaders they supported, but as the possession of all those who lived by the Spirit of Christ – however humble. Over the centuries different groups of 'radicals', whether lay or monastic, would repeatedly emerge in Christian history to support this model of power from below, and to disrupt existing religious and secular forms of power from on high in the process.

Though the two halves of this book consider the pre-modern and modern periods respectively, we see that the fault line between the two runs jaggedly and erratically through both time and place. It opens up whenever and wherever the model of power from on high starts to be overthrown by that of power from below. Thus the modern world comes into being when power, rather than being seen as the possession of sovereigns and monarchs (earthly and heavenly) to whom individuals must submit their lives, comes to be seen as the possession of each individual subject. Since each one is sovereign in his or her own right, power is now thought to come from below, and to be bestowed by 'the people' on their

rulers, rather than the other way round. From this point on, life is seen as something to be lived freely by each individual in his or her own way, rather than according to the rules and laws of others (unless individuals choose to endorse such rules). In the very broadest sense this process may be referred to as one of 'subjectivisation' – since each individual becomes a sovereign subject, rather than the subject of a sovereign.

The second part of the volume traces the way in which Christianity both supports this transition to modernity and fights against it, becoming internally fractured in the process. Thus some movements, such as the Protestant Reformation, support some aspects of power from below (such as the redistribution of power to an emerging middle class) while resisting others (such as the emancipation of women). Others, such as the Roman Catholic church, fiercely resist the redistribution of power from on high *tout court*, and in doing so ensure that movements of nationalism, revolution, democracy and feminism will take on a broadly secular rather than religious profile. In Europe, ecclesiastical resistance to the processes of modernisation and subjectivisation tends to be strong. In the USA, by contrast, the churches become important allies and supporters of the transition to capitalist democracy.

Despite protracted struggles, it is only in the late twentieth century that the model of power from below truly comes into its own with the extension of democratic arrangements to more countries and constituents, with growing affluence in many parts of the globe, and with the widespread breakdown of established structures of authority. At exactly the same time that power from below comes into the ascendant as subjectivisation intensifies, Christianity enters a period of severe decline in much of the west, particularly Europe – but strong growth in large parts of the southern hemisphere. The final part of the volume explores this situation, and shows how it relates to wider issues of social and individual power and empowerment.

I have tried to write this book in a way that will appeal to a wide audience. My aim throughout has been to strike a balance between offering a fresh interpretation of Christianity and providing the basic information that a reader or student new to the area will require. The bias falls slightly towards the former aim, not least because there are already a number of excellent and informative textbooks on church history. But although the book offers a thematisation of history rather than a compendium of

facts, it supplies what is needed in terms of key dates, figures, events and so on. In order to prevent this information from clogging the text, some of it has been pulled into the suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, and summarised in the 'Chronology' at the end of the book.

To the same end, I have not made use of the normal scholarly apparatus. As a result it has been impossible to acknowledge all my sources, despite the fact that a book of this scope draws on the work of an army of other scholars. I have tried to take account of the latest scholarship without neglecting earlier illuminations of the relation between Christianity and society. Sometimes my interpretation runs closely along the lines of a long-established scholarly consensus; sometimes – when the evidence prompts it – it strikes off in a different direction. (So much new and exciting work bearing on the history of Christianity has appeared in the last two decades that the time seemed ripe for some new departures.) I have indicated some of my most outstanding debts in the suggestions for further reading. I should also like to acknowledge the invaluable influence and assistance of a number of colleagues and friends including John Davies, Paul Heelas, Henry Kirk and Gillian Taylor. Both Ellen Clark-King and David Martin read and commented on an early version of the manuscript and gave me advice and encouragement at a critical stage, as did the readers and referees of the book proposal. John Clayton and Alex Wright commissioned the book, and Kevin Taylor and Kate Brett at Cambridge University Press were helpful and supportive editors.

Even though this *Introduction* draws on the work and assistance of many others, it inevitably conveys a personal vision of Christianity. It arises out of a life-long engagement with Christian life and thought at both a personal and a professional level. At different times in my life I have attended Anglican and Roman Catholic schools, worshipped in a variety of churches and been employed by the Church of England. For the last twelve years I have studied and written about Christianity from within a faculty of social sciences in a university with a secular constitution, and I have been engaged in empirical research within congregations in the UK and abroad. My area of research expertise in contemporary Christianity explains the book's particular interest in the modern period, and my location in a faculty of social sciences explains my general approach. Though my reactions to Christianity have been as mixed as what I have encountered, my fascination with this rich and

complex religion has been constant. Writing this book has given me the opportunity to stand back, to consider Christian history in the broadest perspective, and to try to present as truthful an interpretation as I can. My intention has been to stimulate, to engage and to provoke – but certainly not to have the last word.

The last word, in any case, belongs to the actors and not the interpreters of history. A simple scheme of interpretation, such as the one concerning different modes of power that is offered in this book, is effective only as a frame within which the twists, turns and ironies of events that burst its bounds can stand out in sharper relief. Its value lies not in its universal applicability, but in its ability to cast light on Christianity's past as well as on the present direction of things.

In this regard, my hope is that one thing the framework offered here highlights most clearly is the difficulty that Christianity – so long self-identified with power from on high – has had in supporting manifestations of power from below. One consequence has been a reflex within the churches to return to more conservative and 'authoritative' forms of the faith – a tendency very evident today. Yet the ability of Christianity to survive in the highly subjectivised cultures of late modernity may in fact lie not in the churches' ability to forge an authoritative social vision, but in their ability to give spiritual support and inspiration to individuals in the living of their unique lives. If there is a single 'big question' that this book raises it is whether Christianity can subjectivise without losing its soul.

Part I

The Christian revolution: ascent to power

1

How Christianity came to power

> The Word of God [Jesus Christ] . . . is the Lord of All the Universe; from whom and through whom the king, the beloved of God, receives and bears the image of His Supreme Kingship, and so steers and directs, in imitation of his Superior, the helm of all the affairs of this world.

So wrote Eusebius (c. 260–c. 339), bishop of Caesarea, in celebration of thirty years of imperial rule by the Roman emperor Constantine. Three centuries had passed since the death of Jesus. Eusebius had reason to rejoice. Under Constantine Christianity had changed its status from being a cult within the mighty Roman empire to being an officially tolerated religion. Encouraged by Christians such as Eusebius, Constantine had readily accepted the status of deputy of Christ. With the blessing of the 'Supreme King' in the heavens, his ambition to become supreme king on earth was gaining new impetus and legitimacy.

One of the most skilful, powerful and ruthless of the Roman emperors, Constantine had harboured ambitions to unify and expand the Roman empire even before his 'conversion' to Christianity in 312. During the course of his long reign – from 306 to 337 – his commitment to Christianity increased until it became the favoured religion of the empire. The reasons appear to have been political as well as personal. Christianity offered something unique in the ancient world: an exclusivist, universalist, monopolistic monotheism focused on a single all-powerful God. Roman religion was generally pluriform and tolerant. It accepted the existence of many gods and welcomed new ones without any difficulty. The Jews were different, for like the Christians they worshipped a universal, exclusive God and accepted converts, but their religion remained largely ethnic nevertheless. Rooted as they were in the Jewish tradition, Christians worshipped the same universal, 'jealous' God as the Jews – the God of the Hebrew scriptures that the Christians turned into their

'Old Testament'. But they presented him not just as the God of Israel, but as the mighty Lord of the entire universe, beside whom all other gods were not just imposters but 'demons'. They believed that this mighty God had sent his Son Jesus Christ to earth to proclaim his rule and to throw open the gates of heaven to all who would repent, turn from their old gods and old ways, and give total loyalty to him.

It was this exclusivism that many Romans found troubling and that may have been a major cause of the sporadic persecution, both popular and official, unleashed against Christians between 64 CE and 313 CE. It was not that the Romans could not tolerate this new religious group; what they could not tolerate was its intolerance. The most damaging charge against the Christians was that of 'atheism', for instead of respecting other gods they ridiculed and condemned them and claimed that they were evil spirits leading people astray. This was not only insulting; it was a threat to individuals, families, communities and the empire – whose welfare, it was widely believed, depended upon cultivating the continuing favour of a multitude of gods. Christians astonished Romans with their zealous loyalty to a single God and their willingness to die rather than offer sacrifice to other gods.

But as well as leading to persecution, it was this exclusivism that helped bring Christian monotheism to power in the empire. It lent Christianity many advantages: single-mindedness and strength of purpose; a drive to achieve unity in its own ranks and among its own followers; followers who were loyal and devoted; a commitment not just to spread the new religion but to destroy its rivals. Above all, however, Christian monotheism succeeded because it proved such a useful tool for emperors and rulers. 'As there was one God, so there was one King,' wrote Eusebius in the oration quoted above. An all-powerful God who demanded total loyalty from his followers, even unto death, had a natural appeal for Constantine and many of his successors. Not only was the task of securing and maintaining unity within the existing bounds of the empire made easier by the adoption throughout its territories of a single faith in the one God, but the ambition to destroy rival political powers and establish a world empire could be legitimated and furthered by alliance with a jealous God of supreme power.

The realisation of this vision was not easy, and it would be many years before a unified church, built around belief in a God of almighty, exclusivistic power from on high, would win the support even of most

Christians, let alone of a sizeable proportion of the empire. For not all Christians gave their allegiance to this version of Christianity, and not all 'pagans' (as the Christians called Romans who did not convert to their cause) were won over to it – indeed, paganism would survive right through to the medieval period, perhaps beyond.

The version of Christianity that eventually triumphed in the Roman empire after Constantine may be called 'Catholic' ('universal') Christianity. Those who were its champions, such as Eusebius, described it simply as 'orthodoxy'. Every other form of Christianity they labelled 'heresy', and the heretics even more than the pagans were their sworn enemies. According to Eusebius' version of church history, it is orthodoxy that comes first, and heresy that springs up later as a deviation or, as he calls it, an 'innovation'.

In fact, as this chapter will show, things were not as simple as Eusebius would have us believe. The 'early church' was no such thing. Rather, it was an unregulated mix of all sorts of different religious and spiritual groups, all of whom looked back to the inspiration of Jesus Christ, but who interpreted his legacy in different ways and constructed very different sorts of 'church' in the process. Among them was the embryonic Catholic church, which would ultimately win out and destroy its rivals so comprehensively that in most cases our knowledge of them is patchy and comes by way of Catholic denunciations. Even our knowledge of Jesus and of the earliest days of Christianity is mediated to us through this tradition. For in the face of alternative collections of Christian scripture, Catholic Christianity ruled on what should be included in the official canon of the 'New Testament' and what should be left out. Likewise, it attempted to destroy and outlaw rival Christian scriptures, and to leave only its own accounts of the first centuries of Christian history – such as Eusebius' influential *Ecclesiastical History*.

It is for these reasons that this chapter opens not with the birth of Jesus, but with the coming to power of the Catholic church under the patronage of Constantine. Having set this framework, it proceeds by way of a more straightforwardly chronological framework. It begins by discussing the spiritual ferment of the first few centuries of Christian history and the rise of several competing versions of Christianity, all inspired in one way or another by Jesus Christ and the events surrounding him. It goes on to consider in more detail the emergence of Catholic Christianity and its eventual triumph over its rivals, both Christian and pagan. It then

takes the story forward by showing how church and empire entered into ongoing alliance (a subject that is continued in the next chapter). It ends with a brief consideration of the way in which Catholic and imperial Christianity was eventually strengthened through the incorporation of potentially rivalrous forms of ascetic and monastic Christianity.

Spiritual ferment

The Roman empire provided the formative context for the birth and early development of Christianity. So significant – and ultimately beneficial – did this context prove that some Christians, including Eusebius, believed that God had deliberately shaped history in this way. Their belief was strengthened by the fact that Jesus was born at exactly the time that Rome reached a peak of power and stability under Augustus.

The empire was built and sustained by force. A militaristic people led by a deeply competitive aristocracy, the Romans conquered the western Mediterranean world by the end of the third century BCE and the eastern Mediterranean in the second and first centuries BCE. In 31 BCE a single autocratic ruler, Octavian Caesar, emerged victorious from a long civil war and was named Augustus by senate and people four years later. Under this new leader the Roman empire became a single administrative unit with clear frontiers, stretching from the English Channel in the north to Sudan in the south and from Spain in the west to Syria in the east. The principal task of subsequent emperors was to defend this huge territory and maintain stability within it, and the creation of a stable and well-ordered hierarchy of control and authority became a priority. To that end new alliances were gradually forged between emperor and the ancient elites of Roman society (the senatorial and equestrian classes) and below them the local municipal elites; self-government by indigenous rulers in the regions was increasingly replaced by direct Roman rule (with a civil service developing in the process); and the army became a defensive force permanently stationed in strategically important parts of the empire and bound by loyalty to its emperor.

Though ultimately undergirded by military might, the empire tended to mask its crude power under a rhetoric of *civilitas* or civility. Emperors promoted themselves not only as mighty conquerors but as benevolent and paternal rulers and protectors of their people. Likewise the ruling elites were marked off not only by wealth and power, but by their cultural achievements. Increasingly they shared a common literate culture