Introduction

Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus believed fervently that his conversion experience (AD 245 or 246) had been a passage from the darkness of the world of Graeco-Roman paganism that he had utterly rejected to his new vision of Christianity. The discovery and acceptance of a new world-view uncontaminated by the old is the invariable illusion of the convert, and Cyprian, whose education was in fundamental aspects of Roman law and jurisprudence, was no exception. Cyprian's response as bishop to the Decian persecution was to be informed by the pagan culture that he resisted and to which he responded. His Christian eschatology was to run parallel with and to some degree reflect the contemporary ideological claims of the rival claimants to the imperial purple to have brought back the golden age initiated by the games that inaugurated a new millennium, a *saeculum nouum*, or by a renewal of the cult of the dead and deified emperors of Rome's past. The view of Church Order with the bishop as magistrate superintending a penitential system and determining right doctrine in agreement with all other valid bishops throughout the world reflected Roman jurisprudential principles of legitimate authority exercised within a sacred boundary spatially and geographically defined. The emotions, arguments, and convictions with which Cyprian advocated and defended such a model of church government arose from the political discourse of third-century Roman Carthage. We trace the logic of that discourse both in the literary texts and epigraphy as well as in the non-literary material artefacts of Cyprian's historical situation.

Given the highly fragmented state of pagan sources for this period, Cyprian often is the only really contemporary primary source for the events through which he lived. This book will therefore seek to contribute to our understanding of both Roman history in the mid third century and the enduring model of Church Order that developed in that period.

CHAPTER I

Cyprian's life and controversies

A SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT OF THIS BOOK

Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus[1] was almost certainly born in Carthage at a date unknown and lost in the obscurity of his life before his conversion, which took place in AD 245 or 246. His conversion experience is described in his work, *Ad Donatum*, written around this time without the Scriptural references that were to characterize his later work. Soon after his conversion he was ordained presbyter, perhaps in AD 247, but there is no mention of him being ordained deacon first in a *cursus honorum* that led through minor orders to the episcopate.[2] Soon afterwards, in AD 248, he was elected as bishop by the clergy and people of Carthage, and duly consecrated, with some opposition.

Decius' persecution was to begin in December AD 250 and was to lead to disputes within the Church over the claims of ecclesiastical authority regarding the reconciliation of the lapsed. Cyprian interpreted the events of that persecution both against the background of his intellectual and cultural formation in pagan Roman Carthage and in the light of his new-found faith, however much he was to disavow the former and affirm the latter. The view of ecclesiastical order and authority that he was to develop in the context of both his pagan and Christian formation in the course of these controversies was to lead him to clash, in AD 256–7, with Stephen, bishop of Rome, on the issue of rebaptising schismatics and heretics. Their controversy was destined to be broken off in consequence of Stephen's death and Cyprian's martyrdom under Valerian in 257 and 258 respectively.

[1] For the evidence for Cyprian's full title, with relevant prosopographical literature, see Sage, *Cyprian*, pp. 98–100.

[2] Pontius, *Vita* 3.3; Jerome, *De uiris illustribus* 67. See also Sage, *Cyprian*, pp. 135–6; E. W. Benson, *Cyprian: His Life, his Time, his Work* (London: Macmillan 1897), p. 18.

In this first chapter I will sketch the territory to be covered in this book, and the general lines of my argument, to be fleshed out in detail in subsequent chapters.

A CYPRIAN'S EDUCATION AND CONVERSION

Cyprian was the recipient of an education indicative of wealth and status. His biographer described him as having imbibed 'studies (*studia*) and the liberal arts (*bonae artes*)' before he rejected them as merely 'useful to the present age'. He now turned to the 'sacred literature'.[3] Before his conversion he had practised as a *rhetor*, a teacher of rhetoric.[4] Furthermore, during his last days he was urged by 'many men of distinction (*plures egregii*) and of senatorial rank (*et clarissimi*) by their appointment or by their blood-line, but also born from the nobility of this age', to withdraw to a safe haven of their providing, 'on account of their old alliance of friendship with him'.[5] Thus he had before his conversion been, and remained afterwards, of considerable social standing and supported by a continuing network of influence. His family was wealthy, since, on his conversion, he was able to sell his estate (*horti*) at Carthage for the support of the poor.[6]

The proceeds from his estate enabled him to behave towards members of the Church of Carthage like a Roman patron towards his clients, particularly in view of the unexplained fact of the restoration of those estates to him.[7] The clergy and laity duly voted him into office as a bishop in AD 248 shortly after his ordination to the office of presbyter, in the teeth of continuing opposition from five presbyters who had originally objected to his election ostensibly on the grounds that he had so recently become a convert (neophyte).[8] Cyprian acted later, when the persecution came, according to his social obligations to his clients by affording them material support while they remained true to their profession of faith during the persecution.[9]

Amongst the circumstances of his death is the behaviour of the Christian crowd in their support as his clients laying siege to his prison and processing with him to his trial in the proconsul's *praetorium* in the Forum, and subsequently to his place of martyrdom.[10] Following his conversion Cyprian

[3] Pontius, *Vita* 2.2–3.
[4] Jerome, *De uiris illustribus* 67; Lactantius, *Diuinae institutiones* 5.1.24; Augustine, *Sermones* 312, see Chapter 2, section A.
[5] Pontius, *Vita* 14.3. [6] Pontius, *Vita* 2.7. [7] Pontius, *Vita* 15.1 and Chapter 2, section D.
[8] They held this to be contrary to Scripture (1 Tim. 3:6), see Pontius, *Vita* 3.1 and his defence, 3.2–3.
[9] Cyprian, *Epistulae* 5.1.2.9–15; 7.2.15–20.
[10] Pontius, *Vita*, 15.3–5; 16.2–3; *Acta proconsularia* 5.1 and 6.

believed that he had forsaken the present age (*saeculum*) and received a divine revelation both personally and from the sacred Scripture. But revelation is never perceived in a timeless ideational vacuum unaffected by the contemporary cultural background in which it is received.

Whatever that revelation had declared in terms of the Church as the antitype of the types of the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament, whatever it said about the giving of the Spirit to Peter and the twelve apostles in the New Testament, and to the bishops and their hierarchies as successors to those apostles, was to be interpreted by Cyprian in the light of his secular education and general social conditioning. Thus the role of the bishop, successor to the apostles and recipient of the Spirit of the Johannine Pentecost, was to be played out in terms of the patron–client relationship that was fundamental to the structure of Roman society in the province of North Africa.

Furthermore, the rights and prerogatives of the bishop at the pinnacle of the ecclesiastical hierarchy were to be understood in terms of the categories of power and authority of the Roman political constitution and their sacralization. A bishop exercised his spiritual jurisdiction within a spatially bounded territory (*imperium*): he sat in a chair (*sedis*) that was juridical as well as didactic, like the *sella curulis* that was the symbol of a magistrate with *imperium* or constitutional power within ritually cleansed boundaries (*pomerium*). Thus Novatian was committing both treason and sacrilege by invading the sacred space of Cornelius. Those categories, we shall see, were reinforced in the minds of Cyprian and his contemporaries, not simply by the discourse learned through the literary means of a pagan classical education, but also in the non-literary artefacts and iconography witnessed in the material fabric of Roman North African civilization. In such examples as the Forum, the *praetorium*, the amphitheatre and theatre we find artefacts that were to leave their impressions upon the contours of Cyprian's language and thought: such artefacts are the non-verbal components of that discourse which nevertheless form part of its general web of meaning.[11]

B CYPRIAN AND THE IMPERIAL CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY

Cyprian' conversion in AD 245 coincided with a Roman world that was plunged into deep crisis. The period following the death of Severus Alexander in AD 235 was the era of the so-called soldier emperors during which, up until the time of Diocletian, there were constant changes of emperors. We

[11] Chapter 2, sections B.2–5.

interpret the causes of that crisis in terms of natural disasters such as plagues or famines, the inability of a single ruler to administer an empire that was now too large for one man, the rise of Persia as a world power, etc. in the context of the need for constitutional and military reform. But for Cyprian and his contemporaries there was a further metaphysical dimension to that crisis in terms of which they confronted it.

B.1 Nature and society reflect a common, metaphysical, reality

Nature and society, physical change and historical change, were governed according to a Stoic world-view by the force of reason or *logos*, at once spiritual and material, and that permeated all things. The loss of order in society was therefore reflected in the loss of order in nature, and natural disasters occurred in sympathy with the disintegration of society into rebellion and civil war, as well as into wars between nations.[12] The process of historical disintegration was however cyclical.

In the golden age moral and political order had reflected 'right reason' (ὄρθος λόγος) in the physical world in which nature yielded its fruits in unblighted abundance: law and morality had been at one with the benign order of physical nature reflected in social order. The age of bronze and then of iron followed, in which all things were breaking up in the decay of senility, with the earth failing to yield its abundance and society collapsing into ruin from internal strife: fate had now brought forth the 'old age of the world' (*senectus mundi*).[13] At the conclusion of this process the world both of nature and society would be reborn again into a new golden age.

Contemporary historiography, as represented both by Herodian and by Cassius Dio (Xilippinus), had regarded respectively the reigns of Commodus (AD 180–92) and Maximinus (AD 235–8) as marking the points at which a metaphysical transformation from the age of gold to that of iron had taken place.[14] Both Cyprian and his group as Christians, in common with their pagan contemporaries, shared this diagnosis of the cause of crisis and decline in their world. They differed as to its remedy, with pagans looking for the recovery of imperial society under its pagan emperors and its forms of official, public worship, and with Christians seeing the crisis in terms of the imminence of Christ's Second Advent and his future reign.[15] As Cyprian's *Acta proconsularia* reads:

[12] Chapter 3, section A. [13] Chapter 3, section C. [14] Dio Cassius 52.36.4; Herodian 7.1.1.
[15] Chapter 3, section B.

Blessed Cyprian suffered martyrdom on the eighteenth day of the Kalends of October under the emperors Valerian and Gallienus whilst he who truly reigned was our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ . . .[16]

In the pagan view, it was the function of the cult of the gods of the state to record and to reflect, we may say, sacramentally, this historical process of the recovery in a golden age of a society and of a nature that had declined into chaos. The emperor Philip I issued coins in AD 249 commemorating his celebration of the millennial games, held on 21 April 248, heralding the 1,000th anniversary of Rome's foundation in the golden age. The rebel Pacatian celebrated similarly such games the year after. The coinage of the contenders for the imperial purple all laid claims to such an eschatological purpose as the legitimation of their pursuit of power, as inscriptions such as 'new age' (*nouum saeculum*) or 'saviour of the world' (*restitutor orbis*) make clear.[17]

Stoic fatalism placed events beyond human power to alter them, and political legitimation was thus a case of projecting on the coinage the iconography of the ruler as agent or instrument of an inevitable cosmic process. The good favour or otherwise of the gods upon a proposed course of political legislation or proposed act of war was achieved through rites of divination and of augury. The *augures*, who were the official priests of such rites, were often the emperors themselves. Through such cultic and sacramental means the divinely ordered pattern of nature or society, or its chaotic fragmentation, could be divined in terms of the 'peace' (*pax*) or 'anger' (*ira*) of the gods.[18]

It was to this process of political legitimation that the emperor Decius Trajan, in coming to power in AD 249, was to give a new twist.

B.2 Decius' organization of a universal supplicatio

Decius, having defeated Philip I in battle at Verona in that year, was to continue the millenarian ideology as a justification of his own victory. In order to secure upon nature as well as on society the 'peace of the gods' (*pax deorum*), he proposed a universal *supplicatio*, organized with the same purpose as the census of Caracalla and, to some degree, modelled on a census return.[19] Every citizen of an empire, whose citizenship had been made universal by the decree of the latter (AD 212), was to gather at the central shrines of the gods of the Roman state and to perform a propitiatory

[16] *Acta proconsularia* 6 (*CSEL* 3.3, 112–14). [17] Chapter 4, section B.1.
[18] Brent, *Imperial Cult*, pp. 44–50. [19] Chapter 5, sections A.2.1–2.

sacrifice at their altars. In return he was to receive a certificate (*libellus*) to the effect that he had so performed. Thus the power of the official religion of the Roman state in delivering nature and society from metaphysical chaos into a divine and rational order would be increased to its full potentiality, and a golden age, a *saeculum nouum*, would be the result.[20]

Thus it was at this point that the Christians, under Cyprian's leadership, were to part company with pagan society over the remedy for the metaphysical crisis and catastrophe in which both believed. God's peace, and the unity of a disintegrating society, was to be achieved through the Eucharist as the sacrifice of the new covenant, and through legitimate episcopal order that sustained the former's validity as the structure constitutive of the Catholic Church. People could be prepared for the entry into the new age through the baptismal enlightenment and rebirth that Cyprian claims in his own case.

Many Christians rushed eagerly into the Forum at Carthage and pleaded with the magistrates to be allowed to offer the pagan sacrifice and to receive their *libelli*. The deeply held metaphysical viewpoint of the third-century crisis in nature as well as in society, rooted in their cultural background, led them desperately to seek relief from their fear and anxiety through the pagan means that they had learned from their forefathers: the *supplicatio* was their desperate remedy. It was of course formally inconsistent with the Christianity to which they had been converted from paganism, but human beings, when overwhelmed by the events of historical crises, are not usually fully consistent in responses made in the heat of the moment to such events. They were actually persuaded, caught up in the universal enthusiasm of the moment, of the efficacy of such pagan rites to produce a new order of peace and security.

But Cyprian was quite clear on how such acts of participation in pagan order were to be understood.

To Cyprian all who so sacrificed (*sacrificati*) were apostates, whether they did so eagerly, or following official persuasion including torture and imprisonment, or indeed in order to spare their families and household slaves: they had forfeited the salvation achieved at their baptism by denying their baptismal oath as soldiers of Christ and of the age to come. Those who had been allowed to offer incense (*thurificati*) with no animal sacrifices, contrary to the strict letter of Decius' decree,[21] were placed in the same category as were those who bribed the magistrate (*libellatici*) in order to obtain a certificate (*libellus*) that said they had sacrificed when they had

[20] Chapter 4, section C.1. [21] Chapter 5, section A.3.

not. In June AD 251, Decius was slain in battle at Abrittus, and succeeded by Trebonianus Gallus, who himself died at Interama in AD 253. The persecution appears to have ended soon after Decius' death.[22]

Cyprian himself had not remained in Carthage during the persecution, but took the controversial step of going into hiding and administering the affairs of the Church of Carthage through his presbyters and deacons, whom he had commanded to remain at their posts.[23] He had claimed that, as a 'prominent person' (*persona insignis*), he would be particularly exposed in a way in which his clergy would not if they behaved circumspectly.[24] It was a claim that had been treated with some sarcasm in a letter from the Roman presbyters written directly to the Carthaginian Church, without going through Cyprian as their bishop.[25] But now sometime after Easter in AD 251 Cyprian returned from his exile.

C CONTROVERSIES WITHIN THE CHURCH OVER THE LAPSED IN PERSECUTION

The situation with which Cyprian was confronted on his return was one in which he had already been involved through the correspondence with his clergy that survives in his ample corpus of letters. The Church of Carthage, mirroring a similar situation also at Rome, split over the issue of whether those who had apostatized in persecution could still be received at the Eucharist. At stake also was the question over in what precisely that apostasy consisted, though we hear little of the reasons of the people themselves who were condemned to be placed in the different categories of lapsed, as *libellatici*, *thurificati*, and *sacrificati*.

C.1 Degrees of apostasy

There were those who had obtained a *libellus* through a bribe without having actually sacrificed themselves, or who had perhaps delegated the task to a pagan representative (*libellatici*). There were those who had been unwilling to participate in animal sacrifices but had simply been allowed to burn incense instead, perhaps simply to the *genius* of Caesar, without reference to the other, principal, gods of the Roman state (*thurificati*). And finally there were those who, whether eagerly or reluctantly, following torture or fear for their households, simply participated fully in the pagan rites (*sacrificati*).[26]

[22] For a full discussion of an alleged persecution by Gallus, with negative conclusions, see Clarke, *Letters* IV, pp. 177–8.
[23] Cyprian, *Epistulae* 5, 7, and 12.
[24] Cyprian, *Epistulae* 5.1–2 (16–32) and Chapter 5, section B.2.
[25] Cyprian (Anon), *Epistulae* 8.1.1.1–4.
[26] See Chapter 5, section B.

Could any of such groups simply continue to receive communion as though nothing serious had happened,[27] or could they be received back after a suitable penance with absolution? Or, on the other hand, were they to be received back on their deathbeds, if at all? Furthermore, was the act of reconciliation simply the administering of the chalice and paten to those who were refused it following their fall? Or did it involve the imposition of the bishop's hands in reconciliation?[28] The presbyters at Carthage offered the eucharistic sacrifice, as Pontius indicated when he equated Cyprian's ordination to the presbyterate (*presbyterium*) as equivalent to (*uel*) the priesthood (*sacerdotium*).[29] Thus clearly the Carthaginian presbyters had power to reconcile without reference to the bishop as part of their own individual pastoral ministry if the act of reconciliation was simply the act of giving again communion previously withheld.

Or did the reconciliation of the lapsed involve, as Cyprian claimed, the bishop considering carefully the offence in consultation with his presbyterate and finally, after due penance, himself laying hands on the person who had lapsed before readmission to communion? If so, a presbyter could not simply administer the chalice and paten in reconciliation, as, we shall argue, they had so done in the past.[30] They were not in that case so empowered without the reconciling act of the imposition of the bishop's hands that could alone grant or withhold the right to be received back into communion. The terms of that reconciliation the bishop had to agree in the council of his fellow bishops in order to sustain the bond of intercommunion between the dioceses.

Or lastly was indeed the ecclesiastical hierarchy involved in any critical manner at all? And here we come to a dimension to the discussion that Cyprian will neither admit nor profess to understand, however obvious in reality it may have been to himself and to his contemporaries: what sacramental grace could be administered by a confessor or martyr by virtue of his confession or martyrdom alone, without formal ordination to any ecclesiastical office?

C.2 Cyprian and the Church of the Martyrs

An examination of the *Letter of the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* makes it clear that the martyrs transmitted such grace. Furthermore, the Hippolytan *Apostolic Tradition* reveals that a confessor who bore the marks of suffering

[27] We have preserved a papyrus fragment of such a case, in Copres' letter to his sister Sarapias, see Chapter 5, section A.4.
[28] Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.44.4–6 and Chapter 6, section B.3.
[29] Pontius, *Vita* 3.3.
[30] Chapter 6, section B.1.

which was deeply physical needed to have no hands laid on him in order to exercise the office of deacon or presbyter.[31] Cyprian's contemporaries, the confessors Lucianus and Celerinus, show clear indications of such an understanding of the sacramental power of the confessor who survives martyrdom, or of a martyr who actually dies.[32] Cyprian was to insist that flight and exile were in themselves forms of martyrdom, and not examples of lapsing, in a convenient argument that both exonerated himself and weakened thereby the strict definition of martyrdom as involving a markedly physical suffering that created a parallel hierarchy with parallel powers to that of the episcopate.[33]

Lucianus and Celerinus were claimed as authorities for their laxist position by the party of Felicissimus, who supported freely forgiving the fallen lapsed. Cyprian, as we shall see, endeavoured to argue that the martyrs were a distinct group from the laxists, in order to separate their authority from such a position. But at Carthage, unlike at Rome where the confessors supported the rigorist position, their position seemed indistinguishable from that of the laxists.

The supporters of Novatian, on the other hand, advocated a policy of rigorism: apostasy was a mortal sin after baptism that could not be absolved unless perhaps at the moment of death. Cyprian was to take a mediating position, having initially supported a rigorist position indistinguishable from that of Novatian.[34] His diplomatic position came to be that reconciliation could be granted to the lapsed after due penance, in a system graded in order to fit the extent of the crime. Such penance would be prescribed and administered by the bishops having met in council after the persecution was at an end. His pastoral concerns were expressed in medical images: the lapsed, for their own good, could not be readmitted to communion at once, but needed a period of 'healing' as a result of the administered medicine of penance.[35]

Whilst still in hiding, Cyprian had appointed a commission to endeavour to bring about due order at Carthage in accordance with his own definition of ecclesiastical order. The five presbyters who had opposed his consecration as bishop in the first place were siding with the deacon, Felicissimus, and the laxists and their supporters amongst the confessors.[36] Claiming that they were a faction (*factio*) of rebels involved in a conspiracy

[31] For references see A. Brent, 'Cyprian and the question of *ordinatio per confessionem*', *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001), pp. 323–37.
[32] Cyprian, *Epistulae* 21–3. [33] See below, Chapter 6, section C.
[34] Cyprian, *Epistulae* 19.2.3.34–8, cf. 55.4.2.46–54, 7.1.98–100. See also Chapter 6, section B.3.
[35] Cyprian, *De lapsis* 14–15.267–311. [36] Cyprian, *Epistulae* 43.3.1–2 (39–50).