Introduction

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The chapters in this volume of the *Cambridge History of Christianity* present the 'golden age' of patristic Christianity. After episodes of persecution by the Roman government, Christianity emerged as a licit religion enjoying imperial patronage and eventually became the favoured religion of the empire. It was during this period (*c.* 300–600) that the so-called Great Church emerges in the midst, as it were, of a great and vibrant flourishing of Christianities; the stories of the Great Church, the anonymous masses within it and indeed the countless numbers beyond it are retold in these pages.

Christianity was rapidly transformed during this period, and these transformations will be considered under several headings; artistic (ch. 29), cultural (chs. 12, 26–8), inter-religious (chs. 5, 1–11), literary (ch. 13), philosophical (chs. 10, 18–19), political (chs. 14–17), social (chs. 6–9, 17, 20–5) and, of course, theological aspects (chs. 18–20) are specifically considered. This coverage is in keeping with the multidisciplinary character of modern research into this time period, widely known now as 'late antiquity'. Accordingly, chapters in the book have been contributed by specialists in doctrinal theology, historical theology, social history, art history, liturgics, archaeology, philosophy, comparative religion, and philology.

Also in keeping with contemporary standards in the study of late ancient Christianity, the presentation in this volume moves away from simple dichotomies and reductive schematisations (e.g., 'heresy v. orthodoxy') and toward an inclusive description of the diverse practices and theories that made up Christianity during the period under consideration. Our coverage of Christianity therefore aims at inclusiveness insofar as surviving evidence allows (and, again, the wide range of expertise among the contributors promotes the consideration of correspondingly broad-based evidence). Thus, while proportional attention is given to the emergence of the Great Church within the Roman empire, other topics are also treated – such as divergent beliefs and

practices within Christian communities inside the empire, as well as the development of Christian communities outside the empire.

In the West, the foundation of much European culture was laid by Christians as they began to take on much of the Greek and Latin heritage of the region and their faith and practices began to evolve accordingly (ch. 1). Many of the features that came to serve the papacy well in the middle ages and beyond made their appearance during this period. Standard features of Western Christianity (e.g., the biblical canon and its interpretation, the creeds and the roles of bishops, councils and monasticism within the Christian community) reached a level of maturity during this era that justifies speaking of the development of a larger 'narrative'. As is indicated in following chapters on Christianity in the West, bishops and society, lay devotion, pastoral care and discipline and gender, marriage and celibacy, the developing tale of late ancient Christianity featured attractive views of culture, family and friendship.

It is important to note, however, that simultaneously there were developing various understandings of faith and the institutions to serve the Christian West. From the late fourth century onwards, Germanic invaders brought into the later Roman empire their native cultures and religions – and, in some cases, strong Arian churches the origins of which are traced to the conversion of various central European Goths (see ch. 2). With the support of Germanic kings and societies, for whom a strong and unified religious presence was desirable (as for the Roman emperors and their communities), diverse and sometimes competing churches took their place in the Christian history of Europe and North Africa. These competitions often resulted in political involvement or interference, depending on one's position. Had the Arian invaders not been so successful in promoting their faith, established Western Christianity might have taken much longer to attain its imperial form throughout the entire Roman empire. Only later did the Great Church find ways to convert, or to suppress, these Arian Christians. Some communities who were declared heretical (like the Donatist communities in North Africa – see chs. 1 and 9) survived till near the end of our period, or even beyond, and their own stories evolved accordingly. In other cases, where regional Christianities emerged, Christianity was indigenised within a non-Roman culture (as within Celtic societies in the British Isles); these groups too were eventually absorbed into the Great Church.

The westward migration of Christians from central and Eastern Europe was obviously important as it brought divergent creeds into Western Europe and contributed in other ways to the social history of Christianity in the West. The

movement of populations, or even individuals, played a significant part in the history of Christianity generally. From St Paul's missionary aspiration to visit Spain to Athanasius of Alexandria's exiles in Western Europe (not to mention the humbler but no less important journeys of mail carriers), these patterns of travel linked the whole of Europe and allowed Christians to promote their faith and practices broadly.

In Eastern Europe and the Near East, other narratives of Christianity developed (ch. 2). Relations between church leaders in the East and in the West were complex and often strained. The patriarchs in the East frequently looked to the papacy for its consistent adherence to proper faith, and treated it not infrequently as an appellate court when an Eastern synod reached a decision unfavourable to certain of the participants in the struggle. But the popes sometimes found themselves unable to act because they were hopelessly embroiled in political circumstance, and in any case not all of Rome's determinations were endorsed in the Christian East. On the other hand, the bishops of Rome occasionally dissented from the decisions of conciliar majorities, particularly when Rome's own position was challenged. Questions of doctrine and practice – regarding Trinity, Christology, salvation, canon law, local worship and lay piety – were hotly debated around the Mediterranean basin.

These debates occurred not simply inside halls of power and within synods of bishops, but also in fish markets and the public baths. In fact, civil and ecclesiastical politics had begun to intertwine at the local level long before any emperor became personally involved, but with Constantine's political ascent the importance of his Christianity for the divine safekeeping of the empire came to occupy the place that sacrifices to the gods had held for earlier emperors. Even though Constantine did not fully establish any Christianity as the single religion of his empire, showed no profound commitment to Christian virtues and even continued to support various pagan leaders and their religions, the favour he showered on Christians (not least through economic privileges and beneficence) put the empire's traditional religions at a great disadvantage. The programme of building grand churches – seen in Constantine's own works, that of such bishops as Ambrose in Milan, and finally the lavish construction efforts of Justinian throughout the empire – signalled the higher standing of Christians and the appeal of promoting Christianity to those of wealth and societal position. Architecture, liturgy and art as well as the capture of Hellenistic rhetorical and literary forms found the ear and the eye of upper classes who often judged the newer religion in terms of their own culture (see especially chs. 13 and 29). Attempts to justify philosophically Christian claims placed Christian conversation within another major cultural stream (ch. 10).

But of course not every powerful patron favoured Christianity. The emperor Julian (*regn.* 360–3) attempted to revive paganism by drawing on moral features taken from the 'Nazarenes' whom he so hated and, had he but lived longer, the stories of Christianity would have been remarkably different. But his death in battle, perhaps perpetrated by some of his Christian troops, foiled his plans. Theodosius II (401–50) set the final terms for Christian establishment by implementing measures in his legal code against heretical groups and traditional religions. Yet deeper investigation has revealed that, in various places, practitioners of traditional religions and marginalised Christian groups alike survived despite their outlawed status (see particularly chs. 6–7). Hagiography and inscriptions unmistakably illustrate how many bishops continued to struggle with pagan communities and influences (e.g., in North Africa: see ch. 9). We have long known of their efforts in writing against classical Greek and Roman paganism as well as groups like the Manichaeans (ch. 11); but more research findings show that, with bishops needing to give almost weekly attention to other religions' hidden festivals and secretive worship, no Christian group had completely eliminated its competitors, even towards the end of this period.

It also needs to be noted that the Christianisation of the Roman Empire itself was often a tumultuous and divisive business and it sometimes contributed to problems with neighbouring Christian populations. For example, in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Christian factions struggled against each other with alacrity and where the early Byzantines who established the Christianity of Constantinople exerted great pressure on its Christian opponents through taxation and bias in the courts, all the rival Christian communities were weakened. They proved to be no match for the seventh-century invasions of Islam.

The *Cambridge History of Christianity* includes by design significant coverage of Christian developments in the East and in the Orient – subject areas that are sometimes overlooked in surveys of this kind. Such coverage is entirely appropriate, not least because Christianity is, and from its early days has been, a missionary faith with global aspirations. And yet too often the earliest Christian developments outside of the Mediterranean world go unremarked. This is regrettable, though partly understandable, owing to the relative paucity of evidence and the fact that surviving literary and documentary evidence exists in multiple oriental languages. Even so, from the age explored in this book, Christianity enters into the history of a great many civilisations around the world and treatment of these communities in this early epoch helps set the stage for the treatment of 'world Christianity' in subsequent volumes.

For example, in Africa, Ethiopian Christianity is in many ways the great survivor and its roots run deep. Like Christianity in Nubia, it flourished along the Nile and soon showed significant levels of cultural flourishing; but, unlike Nubian Christianity, Christianity in Ethiopia survives to the modern period. In Egypt, where Christianity still survives (albeit as a marginalised and frequently oppressed community), before the end of this era Coptic theologians had already begun to articulate an identity that would sustain them for centuries.

In Asia Minor, Armenia and Georgia forged their national identities along with their Christian identity. Syria was home to vibrant and creative theologians for centuries. Christians also lived and practised their faith in Persia, present day Iraq, and India well before Constantine came to power. Though deeply persecuted in Persia, their numbers grew there and in fact throughout the region. In the meantime, a form of Christianity had made inroads among Arabs, at least in Palestine and Yemen and probably even deeper within Arabia. Yet even before Mohammed arose, some sixth-century Palestinian Christian Arabs were supporting Persia against Byzantine Christians.

We also have indications that at least one monk entered China during the sixth century. The warm greetings expressed by the Chinese emperor near the beginning of the seventh century give evidence that the monk's message of Christianity had caught the curiosity of this leader and seems to have allowed him to relate to it as a fascinating, different expression of 'The Way'.

To summarise, in this volume we deliberately move away from relating the story of Christianity with exclusive reference to the single imperial narrative and toward allowing these other Christianities to appear in their own rights. Even though many of them disappeared from history before the great missionary expansion of the nineteenth century, they are an important part of the rich flourishing of Christian religious and cultural expression that characterised our period. In many of these chapters (as, in fact, in much of this introduction), our attention is naturally drawn to instances of conflict – but we also need to be aware that interactions within and between communities were not always conflictual; they could be, and sometimes were, mutually enriching.

PART I

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CHRISTIANITY: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

1

Western Christianities

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The story of Western Christianities from Constantine to the close of the sixth century is one of both expansion and the formation of diverse Christianities. The expansion is slow and difficult to trace: at the beginning of the fourth century, the Western regions of the Roman empire were much less Christianised than the East, only an estimated 2 per cent of the population.[1] Although the progress can be tentatively gauged from the archaeological and epigraphic records or from the multiplication of episcopal sees, a general picture is difficult to establish. The countryside presumably resisted Christianisation (if it ever became completely Christian) far longer than the urban population; missionary efforts by bishops or monks (if they occurred) changed little. The Christianisation of Western aristocracies, on the other hand, has been comparatively well studied. Only in the second half of the fourth century did Christianity develop a message attuned to the ideology and value-system of the social elite that would attract many of them.[2]

Christian diversity is partly due to major political transformations within the later Roman empire. Perhaps the most important of them was the growing split between the Western and the Eastern parts of the empire. After the death of Constantine, the political division of the empire responded to administrative expediency and the military exigencies of almost uninterrupted warfare on the Rhenish, Danubian and Persian borders. The political centre shifted to the East, to Constantinople. During the fifth century, various German nations filled the power vacuum in the West. Their Homoian churches punctuated the map of Roman Christianities in Italy, Gaul, Spain and North Africa.[3] With

1 See Y. Modéran, 'La conversion de Constantin', 5.
2 See now M. R. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*.
3 If the problematic term 'Western Christianities' is taken geographically, it must also include non-Roman and non-Latin-speaking Christianities. Although the impact of these Christianities must be mentioned here, Germanic and Celtic Christianities are treated at length in ch. 2. The existence of Latin-speaking enclaves in the East (e.g., monasteries in Jerusalem) should also be noted.

some regional exceptions, the West also saw substantial economic decline during the fifth and sixth centuries.

Other significant changes resulted from the religious policies of many of Constantine's Christian successors. Some, like Constantius II or – most impressively – Justinian, were deeply engaged in theological controversies because they believed that doctrinal unity grounded peace and prosperity. But ambitious attempts at establishing doctrinal unity on the part of Constantius II, Zeno or Justinian led ultimately to fragmentation into schismatic Christianities. Confronted with interventionist emperors, bishops like Hosius of Cordova in the fourth century, or Pope Gelasius in the fifth century, protested (not least when the emperors backed their opponents). From the sixth century onwards, the Ostrogothic, Visigothic, Burgundian and Merovingian kings partly emulated the Christian emperors' religious policies. Since their kingdoms were smaller and more homogenous, they had less difficulty controlling churches.

Another important factor in this period is the position of the Church of Rome, which increasingly advanced and confirmed its pre-eminence in the West and even attempted to assert itself further abroad. Pope Julius (*sed.* 337–52) asserted the right to review synodical judgments of other, Eastern, churches; the Western Council of Serdica endorsed his action. Pope Innocent I (*sed.* 402–17) said Peter was the origin of both *apostolatus* and *episcopatus* and demanded that in disciplinary matters all Western churches must follow the Roman church. Pope Leo (*sed.* 440–61) built upon elements of the Petrine ideology already available in formulating the mystical and legal claim that the pope is Peter's deputy. In 495, a Roman synod acclaimed Pope Gelasius (*sed.* 492–96) *vicarius Christi*.[4] Roman Petrine ideology clashed with rival concepts: Justinian conceived of the church as a hierarchically structured body centred on the five patriarchates of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem – an idea Rome denied.[5] With no clear-cut boundary established between Western and Eastern Christianities, from the late fourth century onwards, Rome and Constantinople competed for authority over the Balkan provinces, particularly Illyricum, where the variations of political and ecclesiastical geography were especially complex. During the episcopates of Popes Siricius (*sed.* 384–99) and Innocent (*sed.* 402–17), Rome claimed supra-metropolitan authority in Illyricum orientale, centred in Thessalonica. Even if the

4 Synod of Serdica, cc. 3 and 4 (Joannou, ed., *Discipline générale antique*, 1.2: 162–4); Innocent, *Letter* 2.1 (PL 20: 470); Gelasius, *Letter* 30,15 (ed. Thiel, 447); E. Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums*, 1: 427–31; R. Lorenz, *Das vierte bis sechste Jahrhundert*, 82–4; W. Ullmann, *Gelasius I*.

5 See R. Schieffer, 'Der Papst als Patriarch'.

'vicariate of Thessalonica' lapsed under Pope Leo and his successors, Rome still supported the autonomy of the Illyrian churches against Constantinople.[6]

These, then, are the themes that were in evidence across the Christian West throughout the period under consideration: political transformation and the formation of competing orthodoxies, the Christianisation of Western aristocracies, and the interplay between political and ecclesiastical structures.

Schism and the emergence of Nicene orthodoxy

When Constantine died in 337, he left his sons to rule: Constantine II in the Western prefecture (Britain, Gaul, Spain); Constans in Italy, Africa, Illyricum and Moesia; Constantius II in the East and the diocese of Thrace. Constantine II granted amnesty to some Eastern bishops whom his father had exiled from their sees, among them Athanasius of Alexandria and Marcellus of Ancyra. But their return raised difficulties and soon they were expelled again. Athanasius and Marcellus headed for Rome and appealed to Pope Julius to overturn their condemnations by Eastern councils. After a Roman synod had absolved both of them, Athanasius involved Constans. The Western emperor proposed to his brother Constantius II that they assemble Eastern and Western bishops in a council.

Nearly ninety Western and about eighty Eastern bishops arrived in Serdica (modern Sofia) for that purpose in 342 or 343, but the two parties never met in one council and the Eastern bishops – who rejected any revision of their synodical decrees – eventually withdrew.[7] The Western council continued under the presidency of Hosius of Cordova and eventually issued twenty-one canons. Two diverging creeds were formulated: the Western delegates signed one they viewed as a valid interpretation of the Nicene faith and defended Marcellus of Ancyra's theology; the Eastern bishops circulated one which rejected that position (the so-called fourth Antiochene formula).[8] The failure at Serdica exacerbated an existing rivalry between the emperors. Constans eventually threatened Constantius II with military aggression if he did not allow Athanasius to return to Alexandria. The Eastern emperor, whose army was fighting Persia, yielded.[9] But when he became sole ruler in 350, Constantius

6 The issues involved are complex. For some illumination, see C. Pietri, 'La géographie de l'Illyricum ecclésiastique'. Pietri cautions against attempts to describe the interactions between local churches in late antiquity in terms more attuned to the analysis of the foreign policies of modern states.
7 T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 71–81.
8 See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian creeds*, 274–9; J. Ulrich, *Die Anfänge*, 26–109.
9 Rufinus, *H.E.* 10.20.

tried to heal the rift through creating a common creedal formula. This novel attempt at formulating an explicit orthodoxy led to an intense period of formulating compromise creeds: the second formula of Sirmium (the so-called 'blasphemy of Sirmium', 357); the third formula of Sirmium (358); the fourth formula of Sirmium (359); the formula of Rimini and the formula of Seleucia (359); and the formula of Constantinople (360).[10]

Hosius of Cordova and Liberius of Rome were caught up in Constantius' ambitious religious policy. The emperor suspected Athanasius of high treason and therefore had him condemned by synods in Arles (353) and Milan (355). The Milanese bishop Dionysius – like Eusebius of Vercelli and Lucifer of Calaris (Cagliari) – refused to join the condemnation, and was exiled and succeeded by the Cappadocian Auxentius. Hosius, too, refused to sign the Arles-Milan synodical decision but was probably left unharmed. During the summer of 357 Constantius called a small synod of bishops – possibly under Hosius' leadership – to his residence at Sirmium to heal the theological rift through a compromise formula of faith. The resultant second Sirmian formula outlawed any use of *ousia*-language (e.g., *homousios*, *homoiousios*).[11] Five Western bishops (Hosius, Potamius of Lisbon, and three Illyrians: Valens of Mursa, Ursacius of Singidunum and Germinius of Sirmium) subscribed to the formula. When the aged Hosius returned to Spain and propagated the second Sirmian formula, however, he met resistance in his home province, the Baetica. Meanwhile, Liberius of Rome criticised the condemnations of Athanasius at Arles and Milan and was therefore exiled to Beroia, Thrace. His senior clergy had sworn to support him. But the imperial resolve carried the day and Liberius was eventually replaced by Felix II. Felix proved unpopular, but in any case after two years Liberius was obliged to endorse both Athanasius' condemnation and the second Sirmian formula. Constantius then allowed him to return on the condition that he and Felix share the episcopal throne. The political compromise failed and public unrest ensued. Liberius and Hosius probably signed the creed in order to further the cause of ecclesiastical peace and unity.[12] Notwithstanding their support, the second Sirmian creed was contested in both East and West, and eventually withdrawn.

10 Kelly, *Early Christian creeds*, 283–95.
11 Hilary of Poitiers, *De synodis* 11.
12 Already at Serdica it was Hosius of Cordova who was most interested in reaching a compromise. The authenticity of the relevant letters of Liberius and his subscription to the second Sirmian formula have been conclusively established by H. C. Brennecke, *Hilarius von Poitiers*.