Chapter 1

CHRISTIANISATION

narratives and processes

FACED BY A TOPIC AS LABYRINTHINE AS THE PROBLEM OF Christianisation, it is a relief to begin with a person for whom the problem apparently caused little trouble. Some time in fourth-century Britain, Annianus, son of Matutina, had a purse of six silver pieces stolen from him. He placed a leaden curse in the sacred spring of Sulis Minerva at Bath, in order to bring the miscreant to the attention of the goddess. On this tablet, the traditional list of antithetical categories, that would constitute an exhaustive description of all possible suspects – 'whether man or woman, boy or girl, slave or free' – begins with a new antithesis: *seu gentilis seu christianus quaecumque*, 'whether a gentile or a Christian, whomsoever'. As Roger Tomlin, the alert editor of the tablets, has observed: 'it is tempting to think that a novel *gentilis/christianus* pair was added as a tribute to the universal power of Sulis'.[1] Christianisation, at the shrine of Sulis Minerva at Bath, means knowledge of yet another world-wide category of persons whose deeds were open to the eye of an effective goddess of the post-Constantinian age.

Annianus, and many other fourth-century persons, lived in a universe rustling with the presence of many divine beings. In that universe, Christians, even the power of Christ and of his servants,

the martyrs, had come to stay. But they appear in a perspective to which our modern eyes take some time to adjust – they are set in an ancient, pre-Christian spiritual landscape.

What has to be explained is why these hints of the infinitely diverse religious world of the fourth century remain what they are for any modern reader – tantalising fragments, glimpsed through the chinks of a body of evidence which claims to tell a very different story. It is this story to which we are accustomed. Put briefly: the notion that a relatively short period (from the conversion of Constantine, in 312, to the death of Theodosius II, in 450) witnessed the 'end of paganism'; the concomitant notion that the end of paganism was the natural consequence of a long-prepared 'triumph of monotheism' in the Roman world; and the tendency to present the fourth century AD as a period overshadowed by the conflict between Christianity and paganism – all this amounts to a 'representation' of the religious history of the age that was first constructed by a brilliant generation of Christian historians, polemicists and preachers in the opening decades of the fifth century.[2] By means of this representation, Christian writers imposed (with seemingly irrevocable success, to judge by most modern accounts of the period) a firm narrative closure on what had been, in reality, in the well-chosen words of Pierre Chuvin, a 'Wavering Century'.[3]

Yet, rather than regret this fact, we should look for a moment at why an articulate body of Christian opinion should have chosen to see the history of their own times in this particular manner. It provided for them a facilitating narrative. It was a narrative that held in suspense precisely what we would now call the 'problem of Christianisation'.

In the first place, we must remember the extent to which the conflict between Christianity and paganism was presented, in fourth- and fifth-century Christian sources, as having been fought

out in heaven rather than on earth. The end of paganism occurred with the coming of Christ to earth. It was when He was raised on the Cross on Calvary – and not, as we more pedestrian historians tend to suppose, in the reign of Theodosius I – that heaven and earth rang with the crash of falling temples.[4] The alliance of the Christian church with Christian emperors, to abolish sacrifice and to close and destroy the temples, was no more than a last, brisk mopping-up operation, that made manifest on earth a victory already won, centuries before, by Christ, over the shadowy empire of the demons.

It was, indeed, the starkly supernatural quality of this narrative that made it so useful to contemporaries. It suspended the sense of time. Not only was the triumph of Christ preordained: each manifestation of it was instantaneous. As a result, the immediate human consequences of that victory could be taken for granted. The gods were thought to have passed away from whole regions much as, in the Christian rite of exorcism, the demon was believed to have passed out of the body of the possessed in a single, dramatic spasm, that left the sufferer free to return, immediately, to normal health of mind and body. Narratives of the end of paganism – such as the dramatic destruction of the Serapeum of Alexandria in around 392 – follow an analogous, brisk rhythm.[5] It was enough that Serapis should be seen to have been driven from the shrine that he had 'possessed' for so many centuries, by the power of Christ, made palpable through the successful violence of His servants. It was assumed that Alexandria had been 'healed' by the passing of its greatest god, and could henceforth be treated as a Christian city.

More important still, such an otherworldly narrative even enabled the devotees of the old gods to accept what was, often, a brutal *fait accompli*. The worshippers of Serapis declared that, in a manner characteristic of the gods of Egypt, their god had simply

withdrawn to heaven, saddened that so much blasphemy should happen in his favoured city.[6] The end of sacrifice and the closing of the temples merely reflected on earth the outcome of a conflict of mighty invisible beings. The acclaimed triumph of the one and the lordly withdrawal of the other had to be accepted by mere mortals. No further questions needed to be asked, and life could resume as usual in a murmurous city. Even the defeated had been given a slender imaginative basis for accommodation to the new regime, in much the same way as the solemn, public *psychodrame* of the *damnatio memoriae* of usurpers both declared the notional, eternal victory of the rightful emperor, and, so it was hoped, brought to a merciful close the potentially murderous lacerations of prolonged civil war.

It is, however, in its modern, laicised form that the fifth-century Christian 'representation' of their times has come to influence our own approach to the problem of Christianisation. As a result of a body of late antique Christian evidence largely intended to give a satisfying sense of narrative pace and direction to the progressive triumph of the Church, the process of Christianisation has tended to be presented largely in terms of the impact of a formidable moving body upon the inert and static mass of ancient paganism.[7]

We are like little boys on the sea-shore. We watch with fascinated delight as the tide sweeps in upon an intricate sand-castle. We note when each segment crumbles before the advancing waters. Some parts fall quickly. They have well-known dates: 384, for the controversy on the removal of the Altar of Victory from the Roman Senate-House; 392 (perhaps), for the destruction of the Serapeum; 529, for the closing of the Academy at Athens. Others provoke a sigh only in the erudite: on 24 August 394, for instance, we say good-bye to our last Egyptian hieroglyph.[8] Nothing thrills us more than to find parts of the

sandcastle that have escaped the oncoming tide. We experience an understandable moment of vertigo when Carlo Ginzburg tells us, in his *Storia notturna*, about the old ladies of the Val di Fassa, who informed none other than Nicholas Cusanus, at Bressanone in 1457, that they had touched the shaggy, bear-paw hands of *La Richella*, 'the mother of all wealth and good fortune' – a Braurian Artemis (for Ginzburg, at least) still ministering to the mountain villages of the Alps.[9]

Altogether, we tend to approach the problem of Christianisation as a matter of charting the impact of Christian belief and practice on the whole range of late antique religion and society. We tend to ask, 'What difference did Christianity make?'[10] Unlike our fifth-century predecessors, of course, we do not have the same high expectations of success. The lie of the land of an ancient Mediterranean society makes it seem unlikely to us that all but the most exposed and seaward parts of the sandcastle should fall. We assume that the unthinking mass of *hommes moyens sensuels* could never have been deeply affected by the icy tide of a doctrinaire Christianity – by its shrill ascetic denunciations of sexual pleasure, much less by its Utopian utterances on wealth, slavery and warfare – whose spluttering foam fills so many volumes of the *Patrologia*, as it swashed ineffectually around the solid high ground of Roman *mores*. Christianisation, if it happened at all, must be a slow process, doomed to incompleteness. As Robin Lane Fox has warned us, in the opening pages of his vivid book, *Pagans and Christians*, the brilliant reign of Constantine 'was only a landmark in the history of Christianisation, that state which is always receding, like full employment or a garden without weeds'.[11]

I would like to step aside from this way of looking at the problem of Christianisation. Instead, I will turn, first, to the heavens – to evoke a deeply rooted collective representation of the universe, which gave late antique persons the intellectual and

imaginative tools with which to grapple with the ambiguous religious situation of their age. Second, I will return firmly to earth – to suggest that this particular representation owed its tenacity, in the fourth and early fifth centuries, in large part to the manner in which it lent cosmic validation to the rapid and, for a time at least, self-confident emergence of a new style of imperial rule and a new *ethos* of upper-class life. Third, to conclude, I will sketch the manner in which a crisis of confidence in the imperial system, which became increasingly apparent in the Western empire of the late fourth century, was compounded by a regrouping of Christian opinion, in such a way as to lead to the emergence of an alternative representation of the process of Christianisation to the one we described at the beginning of this chapter. Through the works of Saint Augustine, its more sobre, less vibrantly triumphant and supernatural tones would come to exercise a profound influence on the manner in which Western Christians would look back on the triumph of the Church in the Roman world.

Let us first look up to the heavens. We must remember that it is not easy to do so. Living as we do in a bleakly submonotheistic age, we tend to look up into the sky and to find it empty. We no longer see there a *mundus*, a physical universe as heavy as a swollen cloud (for good or ill) with the presence of invisible beings. Belief in an everlasting universe, at once inhabited and governed by intertwined hierarchies of divine beings and their ethereal ministers, was an article of faith for most late classical persons.[12] It had been put at risk by the rise of Christian doctrine on the Creation and on the end of the world: *vigentem . . . aeternitate sua mundum velut temporarium brevemque despiciunt*; 'The *mundus*, the visible universe, pulsing with the energy of life eternal, they despise, as time-bound and of brief duration'.[13]

It is this collective representation of the divine world that we must first install in the back of our minds when we read the late antique evidence. If we do not do so, this evidence will appear to us as crisp and as clear-cut, but as unreal, as a lunar landscape from which the subtle shades imparted by an atmosphere have been drained. Of all the collective representations that had to move, through the slow redrawing of the map of the divine world at the behest of Christian theologians and preachers, the ancient representation of the *mundus* was the one which shifted with the slowness of a glacier.

Contemporaries tended to stress, in practice, the supernatural compartmentalisation of the universe at the expense of its notional unity. The highest divine power was thought to inhabit its shining upper reaches, far beyond the solid brilliance of the stars. Human beings, placed on an earth that lay in the 'sump-hole of the universe',[14] enjoyed the benevolence of that high power largely through a host of lower spirits, who brushed the earth with their ministrations. An imaginative structure of such ancient majesty and self-evident truth constituted the religious common sense of large numbers of fourth-century persons. It was a common sense shared by Christians. Listen to Saint Augustine preaching in Carthage:

> There are those who say: 'God is good, he is great, supreme, eternal and inviolable. It is He who will give us eternal life and that incorruption which He promised as the resurrection. But these things of the physical world and of our present time (*ista vero saecularia et temporalia*) belong to the *daemones* and to the invisible Powers.'
>
> They leave aside God, as if these things did not belong to Him; and by sacrifices, by all kinds of healing devices, and by the expert counsel of their fellows . . . they seek out ways to cope with what concerns this present life.[15]

It was further assumed that the favoured servants of the One High God were those best informed, also, about the turbulent lower reaches of the *mundus*. They could be trusted to give advice on how to achieve health and happiness in this world. In the 420s, Shenoute of Atripe observed that a provincial governor, 'a man with a reputation for being wise', had taken to wearing a jackal's claw tied to his right toe. The governor informed him that he did this on the recommendation ' of a certain Great Monk'.[16] A leading Christian ascetic had validated what appeared to Shenoute to be a blatantly non-Christian occult remedy.

Shenoute's reaction is interesting. Faced by the thoughtful governor, he did not think of denying the existence of a universe sharply divided between upper and lower powers. He countered, rather, with an exaltation of the power of Christ, as the one being Who was uniquely able to bridge the imaginative fissure that ran across the universe, separating its highest from its lowest reaches. The power of Christ was able to reach down to touch all aspects of daily life in the material world.

> Try to attain to the full measure of this Name, and you will find it on your mouth and on the mouths of your children. When you make high festival and when you rejoice, cry Jesus. When anxious and in pain, cry Jesus. When little boys and girls are laughing, let them cry Jesus. And those who flee before barbarians, cry Jesus. And those who go down to the Nile, cry Jesus. And those who see wild beasts and sights of terror, cry Jesus. Those who are taken off to prison, cry Jesus. And those whose trial has been corrupted and who receive injustice, cry the Name of Jesus.[17]

For men such as Augustine and Shenoute, in the opening decades of the fifth century, the 'Christianisation' that mattered most was the imaginative Christianisation of the *mundus* – the consequential assertion of its unity, as subject to the exclusive

power of the One God, revealed to the world through Jesus Christ, in the face of an ancient, more compartmentalised model, that had tended to explain, and, hence, to excuse, the observed diversity of religious practice on earth. It meant nothing less than the creation of a religious common sense about the actions of the divine and the nature of the universe different from that held by the 'cognitive majority' of their fellows.

The creation of a new religious 'common sense' is a weighty matter, and in order to approach it we must return from heaven to earth – more precisely, to the age of Constantine and his successors, to the fourth-century Roman empire, before the changes that marked its last decades.

When we turn to the public culture of the fourth century, we are faced by a series of apparent disjunctions that force us to re-think what we mean by 'Christianisation' in this period. The situation is as follows. In the fourth century AD, there were many well-placed inhabitants of the restored Roman empire who would have agreed with Professor Clifford Geertz, that 'At the political center of any complexly organized society . . . there is both a governing elite and a set of symbolic forms expressing the fact that it is in truth governing.'[18] Yet a glance at the art and secular culture of the later empire makes one fact abundantly clear; when the 'governing elite' of this officially Christian empire presented themselves to themselves and to the world at large, as being 'in truth governing', the 'set of symbolic forms' by which they expressed this fact owed little or nothing to Christianity.

The array of symbolic forms by which the *potentes* of the later empire showed their dominance was impressive. Hauntingly post-classical mosaics adorned their villas.[19] Exuberant adaptations of old rituals celebrated their power and prosperity.[20] An elaboration of ceremonial characterised the imperial court.[21] Styles of poetry, of letter-writing and of rhetoric flourished, with which to express