

Jewish and Christian Self-Definition

Volume One

*The Problem of Self-Definition:
From Sect to Church*

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It was three quarters of a century ago that Adolf Harnack published the first edition of his great work *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*. Much has happened since the beginning of our century in the study of Christianity in the first three centuries; and particularly as regards the church in which the New Testament came into being, as it seems to a layman, the scholarly scene has been largely transformed. Through all the transformations, however, some of Harnack's fundamental intuitions have remained intact. Among them stands his appreciation of the strong consciousness diffused among early Christians of their being *a people*: a sense ubiquitous in the period from the New Testament to the time of Eusebius, whom it provided with the very foundation of writing the history of the Christian church conceived as a new people. Harnack's comment on the designation of Christians as the 'third race' (*tertium genus*) still forms a suitable starting point for an enquiry such as we are engaged in:

It is indeed amazing! One had certainly no idea that in the consciousness of the Greeks and Romans the Jews stood out in such bold relief from the other nations, and the Christians from both, that they represented themselves as independent 'genera', and were so described in an explicit formula. Neither Jews nor Christians could look for an ampler recognition, little as the demarcation was intended as a recognition at all.¹

Harnack devoted the sixth chapter of his second book to the questions with which this symposium is concerned: the ways in which the church came to achieve, and the ways in which it expressed, this consciousness of its own identity as a group visibly set apart from the common run of people: *extranei a turbis*,

as Tertullian put it (*Apol.* 31). It is not my purpose here to consider how and why it came about that both Christians themselves and their pagan contemporaries in the second and third centuries should have thought of the Christian group as so sharply defined a foreign body, an intrusive presence in their society. My aim is more specific: to consider the social determinants of this consciousness, and, particularly, to look at the social and political factors which may have influenced the emergence of a 'normative self-definition'.

'Sect' is perhaps a dangerous word to use – though I have myself used it in this context² – in a historical enquiry such as we are engaged in. It has too many of the associations which have clustered around the word since the sixteenth century; and the heavy overlay of sociological discussion since Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, though it has no doubt enriched the means at our disposal for understanding religious groups, has not helped to make the concept any less fraught with questions.³ To state our central problem in terms of a development from 'sect' to 'church' may, therefore, be to ask for trouble. The concepts are so deeply rooted in centuries of later Christian history that their use raises very serious problems for the historian of ancient Christianity. There are obvious senses in which early Christian groups were 'sects' of Judaism, and other, perhaps less obvious, senses in which they retained, long after their emergence from a Judaic *milieu*, many of the characteristics which have come to be associated with 'sects'. Ernst Troeltsch, though a pioneer, was acutely conscious of the conceptual and methodological problems and had serious reservations about applying the contrast between 'sect' and 'church' in the period before the development of a sacerdotal and sacramental system, a process of institutionalization not realized before the Gregorian reforms of the eleventh century.⁴ Whether we take this view, or a more phenomenological approach to the definition of the concepts, there is an insistent family-likeness about early Christian communities and many of the classic examples of the sect-type.⁵ Considered in terms of the empirical characteristics of the group, Christian communities of the first two centuries at any rate had much in common with later 'sects'. Whatever they had to offer their members, Christian congregations could give them a sense of belonging, fostered by the direct fellowship within an intimate group, warmth, closeness and mutual support.⁶ Their appeal to the displaced persons of the Roman world in Hellenistic cities needs no explanation

more remote than does, for instance, the appeal of pentecostalism in the rapidly expanding cities of nineteenth-century North America.⁷ It is not difficult to appreciate that no very elaborate doctrinal or institutional structures were needed to give such groups a sense of identity strong enough to define themselves with more than adequately sharp contours in their world. Their doctrinal distinctiveness, however defined, was reinforced, sustained, perhaps even eclipsed, by their sociological distinctness as groups set, literally, apart from their world. A cliquish subculture and a religiosity of the gathered elect was fostered not only by the nature of their own belief, which was insistent on reminding them that their *politeia* was not on earth, but also by the enmity of outsiders who were only too ready to underline the force of this teaching by suspicion, calumny and pogrom. The whole world conspired together to define the Christians as a visibly identifiable group, or rather groups, sharply marked out in society.

Christians had, of course, always felt the need to identify themselves doctrinally, if only in some incipient way. But the history of Christian self-identification cannot be written in terms of a steady progression from simple to complex. In one sense the whole of the church's history is a growth in self-awareness; every important encounter with a new society, a new culture, with shifts in men's assumptions about their world, themselves or God, with upheavals in the values by which they try to live, brings with it new self-discovery. Psychologists have long been telling us that we discover our selves only in encounter: what is self and what is not self are disclosed to us in the same experience. But what psychologists have long been clear about has been less often clear to historians of the church. Looking back at the early phases of a development whose outcome we cannot help knowing, hindsight is our occupational disease. We have not always avoided the trap of thinking that we know quite well what we are talking about when we speak of the 'church' of the first or the second century – better perhaps than did first- or second-century Christians – and that we are engaged in the task only of describing 'its' nature or recounting 'its' career, as if we knew what the 'it' was. We don't; but a long tradition of ecclesiastical history-writing has deceived us into thinking we do. The tradition goes right back to its fountainhead, Eusebius.

Eusebius's vision of the church's history is notorious: under the restraining influence of the apostolic generation she

remained pure and uncorrupt; only in the time of the emperor Trajan, with the final extinction of that influence, did 'godless error' receive free rein and only then was the pure virgin corrupted by the 'deceit of false teachers' (HE III. 32. 7-8). Eusebius was quoting Hegesippus here, but he had made Hegesippus's view – a view widely current in the second and third centuries – very much his own; and, in his turn, he passed it on to the long line of his successors in the sequence of church historians.⁸

A symposium such as this is the product of a breakdown in the power of Eusebius's assumption. The notion that orthodoxy is the original and primary teaching of the church from which heresy is deviant and derivative received a severe jolt – for the first time since Gottfried Arnold's *Unparteyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie* (Frankfurt a.M., 1699) – with Walter Bauer's study of divergent traditions in the Christianity of the first two centuries; and much of the work in New Testament studies since the last war has in effect faced us with Bauer's question a stage further back, in the setting of the apostolic church: was there ever a unified and coherent concept of orthodoxy even among the earliest communities, those which gave the New Testament writings their shape? This is ground on which I am ill-qualified to tread, and happily, it lies outside the terms of my brief. It has been the subject recently of the magisterial synthesis by J. D. G. Dunn.⁹ If there is truth in Ernst Käsemann's famous claim that 'the New Testament canon does not, as such, constitute the foundations of the unity of the Church; on the contrary, as such . . . it provides the basis for the multiplicity of the confessions',¹⁰ we need to transpose Eusebius's and his followers' enquiries into the origins of heresy and orthodoxy into a new key. In other words: given that the earliest Christianity is a bundle of divergent traditions – traditions of doctrine, of worship, of church-order, of sacramental practice and of Christian experience at large – how are we to account for the emergence within the course of the first three hundred years of Christian history of the sense that in some or all of these matters there is or should be a uniform orthodoxy, with its roots in a primitive tradition, from which deviations are to be reckoned as 'heretical'?

In trying to answer this question, I want to explore the hypothesis that the emergence of this self-definition should be seen in two major stages. The first of these was born of the 'crisis of identity' precipitated by the encounter between Christian and 'gnostic' movements. In its essentials this phase in the crystalliza-

tion of Christian self-consciousness was completed by about 200 CE. Much of this symposium is devoted to it, and I touch on it here only briefly, as a prelude to the second phase and in order to point the contrast between the two.

The achievement of this first phase was to bequeath to the church of the third century a doctrinal and ecclesiastical structure sufficiently defined and sufficiently homogeneous to demarcate the 'great church' from the sects. Yardsticks were coming into being whereby the claims of groups to be 'churches' could be tested: the apostolic tradition, the rule of faith, the New Testament canon. I hesitate to call them criteria of orthodoxy; they seem to meet a more fundamental need. They enabled men to answer the question: 'where, really, is the church to be found?', rather than the different question – closely related though it is – 'what is the true teaching of the church?' Down to around the year 200 it was the first question that was agitating Christian minds; but the ground was to shift in the century or so to follow. The difference is blurred by the ancient but inveterate habit of referring to Gnostic religion, adoptionist teaching, Arian doctrine, christological error and many other things, by the blanket term 'heresy'. If a reading of Irenaeus were to fail to convince, Tertullian's *Scorpiace* clinches the conclusion that to him and to other Christians around 200 CE, what mattered was not the precise shades of the true teaching but the identity of the Christian church among the sects.

The work is a summons to the Christian community of Carthage to resist the heretics' denigration of martyrdom.¹¹ Readiness to obey the call to martyrdom is the distinguishing mark of the Christian, what separates him from the multitudes of those who neither valued it nor were exposed to its threat.¹² The line ran between the real Christians and, over against them, the Gnostics and pagans; so, at least, Tertullian wanted to show it as running. Frend was able to bring together a considerable body of evidence to suggest that in all sorts of ways the Gnostic was able to go much further than the Catholic in conforming to pagan society. For Tertullian and his contemporaries, the Gnostic sect was more like a 'school' than a 'church'.¹³ Tertullian was clearly anxious to draw the lines between Christian orthodoxy and Gnostic heresy very sharply, and he may have exaggerated the extent to which Gnostics avoided martyrdom; and Frend may have been misled by placing too much reliance on the evidence of their opponents concerning Gnostic attitudes.¹⁴ Moreover, it is clear that in its

fundamental attitude to the world Christianity stood much closer to the central tradition of Graeco-Roman thought than to Gnosticism.¹⁵ Tertullian's argument may well be a distortion of the real nature of the complicated three-cornered relationships between Gnostics, Christians and pagans. What emerges beyond the distortions with dramatic clarity, however, is the urgent need Tertullian felt to define the identity of the Christian group. It was very much in keeping with his propensity to find sharp discontinuities that he chose to define it in terms of martyrdom. Here, after all, had been the most visible expression of the line that divided the church from the world outside it. The line was shifting and beginning to break in Tertullian's generation; as he was himself, sometimes, keenly aware, church and world were growing together and beginning to interpenetrate. There is something heroically archaizing about Tertullian's attempt to reassert, in the face of this, their ancient separation. The archaism was to drive him, eventually, from the church as it was being shaped during the Severan age into the Montanist rejection of the institution. In a world where separate identities were hard to discover and harder to maintain, Tertullian's passionate search for a true Christian identity led him to find his bearings in a past whose starker divisions he projected into his own more problematic age. The image of Christianity as a persecuted élite provided Tertullian with an archetype for seeing the church in relation to the world precisely at a time when the church was ceasing to be recognizable in such terms. What his *Scorpiace* attests is this necessity, in the time of crisis, to define the identity of the Christian among fringe-groups, and to call on his fellow-Catholics to assert their separate identity. They must resist the temptation of allowing themselves to be sucked into the whirlpool of the sects who were prepared to be assimilated to the pagan world. Christians must remain separated from the world, and that involved separation from the Gnostic sects. The threat of being assimilated to the Gnostic sects – unlike the threat of, for example, an erroneous trinitarian doctrine – involved a threat to their Christian identity, not to their orthodoxy.

The structure of the argument in Tertullian's *De praescriptione haereticorum* is all of a piece with this. Its central thrust is to define the heretic as the absolute outsider (especially chapters 15–21). Its very title rules the arguments of the heretics literally out of court, before being even given a hearing.¹⁶ The true doctrine is what is taught in the apostolic churches and those in communion with

them. Orthodoxy – if so problematic a word may be used here – is not approached through its content, by theological argumentation, but defined by reference to its *milieu*: a rigorously identifiable 'church'. Orthodoxy is what is acceptable in churches which satisfy the criteria of a true church.

The accent in this first phase of self-identification is on defining the hallmark of the Christian church among its competitors; not on identifying the true doctrine. (I shall return below to the qualifications that this statement requires, even in the case of Tertullian, who did, of course, attack specific 'heretical' doctrines in some of his works.) The teaching acceptable in the apostolic churches was, at this time, still a wide spectrum of doctrinal options. If we are to accept what we are being told by so many of our New Testament scholars, we must see the New Testament canon itself as canonizing a number of disparate and sometimes divergent Christian traditions. In subjecting itself to the scriptures of the canon, the church proclaimed the canonicity of diversity: a diversity which had its roots deep in the very origins of the New Testament *kerygma* (or rather *kerygmata*). Dunn has seen the canon as a circle which marks out the limits of acceptable diversity. By including within it the variety of acceptable teaching, it not only excludes what lies outside the circle, but defines a centre. Dunn sees the affirmation of the identity of Jesus the man and the exalted Christ as this centre, and he defines the limits of acceptable diversity thus:

diversity which abandons the unity of faith in Jesus the man now exalted is unacceptable; diversity which abandons the unity of love for fellow-believers is unacceptable. In other words, where the conviction had been abandoned that worship of God was determined by Jesus of Nazareth and his resurrection, was now 'through' Jesus, then diversity had gone too far; or where the conviction had been abandoned that the one encountered in worship now was not really fully one with, continuous with Jesus the man, then diversity had gone too far; or again where diversity meant a breach of love towards those who also called upon the name of this Jesus, then diversity had gone too far. *The centre also determined the circumference.*¹⁷

Dunn's central criterion, the unity of the man Jesus and the exalted Christ, may not be acceptable to all New Testament scholars and theologians, and I do not wish to place any weight on it. What is of importance for our purpose is his insistence that the canon enshrined both diversity and unity, not his description of either the range of that variety or the precise *locus* of the unity.

Something akin to this is implied by Irenaeus in his attempt to define the line which divided Christianity from the 'falsely so called Gnostics'. The bedrock was faith in a historical person and a history of God's acts culminating in Jesus. This was the *hypothesis*, the subject-matter, on which men may speculate, which may be understood in diverse ways, but which may not be altered.¹⁸ Irenaeus, to be sure, would no doubt have included in this *hypothesis* much more – presumably something like the content of his little Sunday-school Bible-history, the *Demonstration of the Apostolic preaching* – than Dunn would include in his. What, amid all the differences between a modern critical scholar and a bishop at the end of the second century, Irenaeus has in common with Dunn is a sense of apostolic Christianity as comprising a range of options within limits defined by a central, unifying core. This is the achievement of what I take as the first phase in the development of a 'normative self-definition' in Christianity.¹⁹

Before I move on to consider my second phase, it is proper to note that not many Christians of the second or third centuries could have had even the rudimentary sense of latitude within the received range of doctrinal traditions that I detect in Irenaeus. Origen, as far as I know, is the only writer of the period who came within sight of appreciating the inadequacy of the prevailing notions of heresy and orthodoxy – those expressed by Hege-sippus and Eusebius (cf. above, pp.3f). In a single paragraph of his *Contra Celsum* (III.11) we get a momentary glimpse of an awareness of some divergences within the earliest traditions of Christianity. His curiously ambivalent attitude to, and apparently confused statements about, 'Christianity' in relation to 'sects'²⁰ would deserve examination in the light of his awareness, unique among patristic writers, of divergent doctrinal traditions as rooted not in later corruption but in primitive, apostolic tradition. I cannot undertake such an investigation here; but I would hazard the guess that the clue to it is to be found in the nature of the evolution of Alexandrian Christianity during the period of Origen's lifetime. The famous story told by Eusebius (*HE* VI.2.13–14) about Origen's rigid 'orthodoxy in the faith' while dependent, in his youth, on the patronage of an Alexandrian lady much less discriminating in the bestowal of her patronage tells us much more, as Bauer noted long ago,²¹ about the nature of Alexandrian Christianity than about Origen. But by the 240s neither the Alexandrian church nor the church of Caesarea, where Origen had gone, can have been as wide in the range of

tolerance accorded to deviant doctrines as they had been in Origen's youth. Eusebius's story presumably reflects Origen's need to defend his orthodoxy.²² I do not think it unlikely that the subtleties – or confusions? – of Origen's view of 'sects' may be traceable to this change both in his own position and in the character of the Alexandrian church.

Origen wrote his *Contra Celsum* around 248. His generation had already experienced far-reaching changes which were transforming the character of the church, not only in Alexandria. The conditions of Christian existence were changing dramatically in the age of bishops such as Demetrius of Alexandria, Dionysius of Corinth, Serapion of Antioch and Callistus of Rome: the splendid survey by R. M. Grant²³ makes it possible for me to use these names only as pointers to the rapid growth in the church's organization, the scale of its operations and its property, the emergence of 'ecclesiastical empires' around some of the greater sees, and the more regular contacts developing between major centres. The growth in the size of Christian communities and their considerable social diversification from the beginning of the Severan Age is suggested by indirect evidence of a varied kind: Tertullian's argument in his *Ad Scapulam* presupposes that there were many well-to-do people and men of importance in public life among the Christians;²⁴ Origen, writing his *Contra Celsum* in the late 240s, seems to have been aware of the change in the status of Christianity since the time of Celsus: it was much less easy now to dismiss it as a religion of slaves, women and little children. The peace which the church had enjoyed 'for a long time now' (*CC*.III.15), during the period in which the religious conservatism of Roman society was notoriously relaxed,²⁵ must have contributed much to extending the influence of Christianity among classes previously not much touched by it. The threat of persecution which Origen saw on his horizon was something else than it had been in earlier times: no longer local and popular outbursts of riot and pogrom against an unpopular minority cult, the persecutions of the third century were to be government-initiated and aimed against a religion set on making a bid for the loyalties of men on whom the Empire depended for its traditional culture and its functioning. From Decius to Diocletian Roman society was closing its ranks against the religious laxity which had undermined its ancient religious foundations and allowed great scope for the extension of Christianity, a rival now much more dangerous than it had been in the second century. If the third century was 'the making

of late Antiquity',²⁶ it saw, also, the making of the catholic church. What we need to elucidate is the emergence of a new kind of doctrinal self-identification among Christians in this, what I have called the second, phase in the growth of Christian self-awareness.

In his famous chapter at the beginning of the eighth book of his *Ecclesiastical History* Eusebius describes the state of the church on the eve of the Great Persecution. It is striking that he links the prevalence of divisions and heresies (*HE* VIII.1.7–9) closely with the flourishing state of the church and the honour and recognition widely accorded to it, (*ibid.*, 1–6). But we cannot rest content with his explanation: the principle that softness and schism are related is no more illuminating than the principle which would link misery with mysticism. What is the nature of the relation, if there is one, between the changed composition and changed place in society of the Christian church, asserted by Eusebius and confirmed by snippets of evidence of a varied kind, and the new nature of the heresies now dividing the church? Compare the *cause célèbre* of the third century which cannot have been far from Eusebius's mind, the heresy of Paul of Samosata, with the heresies which were Irenaeus's target: are we not in a different world altogether? If we may indulge in some speculation I would conjecture that Irenaeus, had he understood the doctrinal issues at stake in the trial of Paul, would have allowed his christology as legitimate reflection on the *hypothesis* of faith fixed once and for all. He would – as would Tertullian and Origen – have thought him wrong:²⁷ he would not have thought him a 'heretic'. What had changed was the concept of 'heresy'. Previously used to define the *locus* of the true church among the competing sects, it was now becoming the name for teaching at variance with its obverse, an emerging 'orthodoxy'.

This shift in the meaning of the concept is masked by its gradual character. The contrast between 'heresy' as understood in the time of Irenaeus, say, and at the time of Nicaea, is stark enough; but what are we to make of Hippolytus, or Tertullian? Works like the *Contra Noetum* or the *Adversus Praxean* deal with questions whose roots lie among those which had agitated the generation of Irenaeus; but they seem clearly to cross the threshold that separates the world of Irenaeus from that of the fourth century. The nature of the issues at stake in the argument, the assumptions behind the debate and its whole style have changed: we are in a more sophisticated world of theological

abstraction and complexity of technical argumentation.²⁸ It needed only the added ingredients of ecclesiastical politics seasoned with disputes over property to produce a full-scale heresy trial such as that of Paul of Samosata. The area of tolerable diversity in teaching has shrunk, in the course of my 'second phase', with the accent shifting increasingly towards defining what is the true doctrine and away from defining the *locus* of the true church.

The reasons for this shift are unlikely to be capable of any simple explanation. Two things, at any rate, must evidently have played some part in bringing it about: the natural momentum of theological thinking inevitably brought greater refinement of the issues and greater sophistication in dealing with them; and the greatly increased coherence and uniformity of ecclesiastical organization is unlikely to have encouraged the growth of doctrinal divergence. Beyond this, however, the links, if there are any, between the social composition and standing of the Christian church, its growth and its new place in Roman society on the one hand, and its efforts to reach a new kind of doctrinal and 'normative' self-definition on the other, are not at all clear. I have little doubt, however, that the church's sloughing off of so much of the 'sect' character in the course of the third century must be of decisive importance here. Amid all the uncertainties of this age, three things are sufficiently clear: first, the very much accelerated growth in the numbers of Christians and in the size of local communities. Second, there was a considerable diversification in their social composition: no longer groups preponderantly of the underprivileged and the deprived, they were becoming more mixed, reflecting the social stratification of the world around them. No longer suspect to outsiders on account of their inward-looking cliquishness – 'a lurking breed which shuns the light of day'²⁹ – they were seen among cultivated pagans and in government circles as an important group in society, and as a threat to its moral homogeneity at a time of crisis. The word 'crisis' points to the third striking feature of our period: the world around the Christians, Roman society from Gaul to Syria, was in the grip of a crisis of unprecedented depth. Not only its social fabric and political stability were in jeopardy; the sense of security of an ordered world was undermined and dissolving into a confusion of concepts, attitudes and feelings. Ancient traditions were losing their hold and Roman society had to rally all its conservatism to their defence.

We have been reminded that the relationship between crisis and religious change is by no means a simple one;³⁰ but I still find much force in Professor E. R. Dodds's suggestion that Christianity was the chief beneficiary of the urge which leads disoriented men to find a new hope in new groups and around new leaders. He has written some moving pages³¹ on the need men of the second and third centuries felt to discover their identity. Removed, as so many of them were, from their traditional background and deprived of their bearings in their world, 'membership of a Christian community might be the only way of maintaining their self-respect and giving life some semblance of meaning'. Dodds was thinking of the small, intimate, face-to-face communities in which the rootless inhabitants of the great cities could find their 'need to belong' satisfied; where they could find – more important than material support – real human warmth and a sense of 'belonging'. But that is not the kind of community that 'the urbanized tribesman, the peasant come to town in search of work, the demobilized soldier, the rentier ruined by inflation and the manumitted slave' of whom Dodds is writing would have found in Antioch or Alexandria, Carthage or Rome, in the later third century. The Christian communities had become effectively cross-sections of Roman urban society. They had not only grown larger, but – more important – lost much of their social and cultural homogeneity. The human need which gave urgency to the question 'What am I?'³² had been more easily satisfied in the informal relationships of the sect than in the greatly institutionalized church of the later third century.

The lines which marked the Christians off from the world around them were becoming increasingly blurred as Christianity became more 'respectable' and as more and more Christians came to share the culture, the values, tastes and life-styles of their non-Christian contemporaries. As the lines of demarcation imposed on them by their foreignness to the society around them melted away, doctrinal norms and recognizable, uniform institutional structures came to take their place in defining Christianity. Social anthropologists have noted the correlation between the elaboration and stability of ideas about God and the degree of clarity and order in the structure of relations in a society,³³ the evolution of the third-century church and the growing stress on doctrinal self-definition seem to confirm this Durkheimian principle.

I do not want to suggest that the development in what I have

designated as the 'second stage' of the church's normative self-identification was something totally new or revolutionary. Tendencies in this direction might be seen at work even within the apostolic age, and *Frühkatholizismus* has a respectable foundation among the New Testament traditions. But, whatever the reason, the striving for as complete an elimination of doctrinal and institutional diversity as possible seems to become greatly intensified in the period after c. 200. Moreover, as in so many other respects, it was the Constantinian settlement which finally determined the church's stance in this matter.

Concerning Constantine's own conviction of his mission to secure the unity and peace of the church as a task divinely entrusted to him, Baynes's classic study³⁴ remains the basis on which we must build. But the exact ways in which he interpreted this task in securing the church's unity throughout his reign, though they all show his concern for unity, are not without interest. They deserve a more careful re-examination than I can give them here.³⁵ In the first case to arise, the Donatist schism, Constantine was faced with the question: which of two rival groupings could rightfully claim to be the true church? The question with which he was faced immediately on gaining control of the Eastern provinces in 324 was different: which of two rival doctrines was the true teaching of the church? His response, in the famous letter addressed to Alexander and Arius³⁶ reveals his mind very clearly: deprecating first that the dispute should have arisen at all, for matters so vast and profound are beyond the reach of human comprehension, the emperor notes that as yet the disagreement has caused no schism and that neither of the contestants has been guilty of introducing a *haeresis* pertaining to the worship of God. Let them therefore beware of setting brother against brother and agree to differ on these matters of little or no importance; let them, like philosophers who disagree on reconcilable points of philosophy, nevertheless maintain the union of their body.

The emperor's view of the contentious issues as concerned with insignificant matters of no moment was unlikely to be endorsed, and remains so to this day in many quarters. Discounting this piece of theological naiveté, his interpretation of the nature of the dispute and his attempted reconciliation contain a curiously traditional note. The assumption that theological disagreements are not necessarily heresies and that the unity of the church should be able to contain them brings us an echo from

the world of Irenaeus and Origen. 'The trouble, however', as Eusebius perceptively put it (*VitConst* II.73), 'was more than could be put right by one letter.' Thanks to more recent studies³⁷ we must now amend Baynes's reconstruction of the events surrounding the councils held at Antioch and Nicaea and that intended to be held at Ancyra in 325; but his final evaluation³⁸ of the emperor's policy has been triumphantly vindicated: 'he has been accused of weakness and of hesitation in the execution of his religious policy; yet in his purpose he never wavered, though he might vary the means chosen for its realization; he knew that it was idle in the cause of unity to create schism'. As against the exclusivism of Ossius of Cordova, Eustathius of Antioch, Marcellus of Ancyra and of Athanasius, Constantine stood consistently for harmony and comprehensiveness.

For reasons which we must assume to be political rather than theological, in doctrinal conflicts Constantine adopted a standpoint much more in line with an older Christian tradition than with the viewpoint represented by his chief ecclesiastical adviser down to 325, Ossius of Cordova. But that tradition was now doomed to speedy extinction. Constantine's 'program of tolerance and persuasion within the Church', as Robert Grant has judiciously said³⁹ 'was frustrated by "true believers" of various kinds. . .'. The 'true believers' came into their own with the fateful alliance of Christian church and Roman Empire. The future belonged to bishops like Ossius; but Eusebius, though he stood nearer to Constantine in the Arian controversy than did others such as Ossius, gave the Constantinian church a new past in his *Ecclesiastical History*: a work in which he canonized a vision of that past already simplified by his predecessors such as Hegesippus. It was Eusebius who made the monolithic imperial church which was to emerge in the course of the next hundred years or so intelligible as the end-product of the three centuries of history which he gave it. Elements of Eusebius's image of the church's history, and especially of the emergence of heresy and orthodoxy, had been adumbrated by other Christian writers long before his time. Moreover, it may turn out⁴⁰ that Eusebius's notion of the church's history had crystallized rather earlier in his career than used to be thought: long before Constantine's victory in 312 and its sequel. It remains true, nevertheless, that his image of the church's past became peculiarly well suited to meet the needs of the post-Constantinian church. The notion of a church which could contain within its unity a variety of doctrinal tradi-

tions became increasingly remote. For centuries the assumption that diversity of doctrinal traditions is incompatible with unity and error synonymous with heresy could scarcely be questioned. In failing to resolve the deep-seated tensions contained within its inheritance, the Constantinian church became dangerously identified with the 'establishment'. Driven by the logic of this ecclesiology, it came to project doctrinal deviance beyond the pale and heresy became a 'technique of revolt'.⁴¹

The trend towards more far-reaching and more rigid doctrinal self-identification on which the Constantinian settlement set the seal had, of course begun much earlier. Its roots – as I have noted – reach back even into the apostolic period, in that at no time could Christians identify themselves and their communities without some reference to the substance of their belief. During the third century, however, alongside the structural and social changes that Christianity was undergoing, the drive towards a further and fuller doctrinal self-definition seems to have intensified, to a degree that might allow us to speak of a difference in kind. At any rate, the 'great church' from the fourth century on came to share one of the distinctive characteristics of the sect-mentality: a need for uniformity and homogeneity, a need to outlaw deviance from its communion as 'heresy' and an inability to preserve the ecumenicity of diverse traditions.⁴²