

naeus promises that he will explain for them what the Scriptures really mean and insists that only what he teaches is true.

His primary challenge was this: How could he persuade believers that the “common” baptism, which all believers receive, far from being merely the preliminary step in the life of faith, actually effects, as he claims, “rebirth to God”? And how could he persuade them that it conveys not just the elementary teaching that beginners need but nothing less than the “whole faith”? In response, Irenaeus helped construct the basic architecture of what would become orthodox Christianity. His instructions to congregations about which revelations to destroy and which ones to keep—and, perhaps even more important, how to interpret those they kept—would become the basis for the formation of the New Testament and what he calls its “canon of truth,” which, in turn, would become the framework for the orthodox creeds. None of these, of course, were Irenaeus’s single-handed accomplishment; on the contrary, as he was the first to point out, he built upon what he loved to call “apostolic tradition” and incorporated the efforts of many others. This does mean, however, that the actions he took, developed by his ecclesiastical successors, proved decisive for what would become Christianity as we know it—as well as what we would not know of it—for millennia to come.

CHAPTER FIVE

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CONSTANTINE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

When I found that I no longer believed everything I thought Christians were supposed to believe, I asked myself, Why not just leave Christianity—and religion—behind, as so many others have done? Yet I sometimes encountered, in churches and elsewhere—in the presence of a venerable Buddhist monk, in the cantor’s singing at a bar mitzvah, and on mountain hikes—something compelling, powerful, even terrifying that I could not ignore, and I had come to see that, besides belief, Christianity involves *practice*—and paths toward transformation.

Last Christmas Eve, I went to the midnight service with my sixteen-year-old daughter, Sarah, who, as an infant, when I carried her with me to the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York, would raise her head to listen intently to the singing cas-

cading down from the choir loft. When she was eight, she joined the choir at Trinity, a Protestant church in Princeton, because, she said, "the music helps my heart." Now, eight years later, after walking in the cold, we slowly pressed our way through the crowded church and found a place to sit close together on the stone stairs behind the lectern, where the choir was standing. This celebration was one that I loved as a child, and had come to love again as an adult, especially since the birth of our first child, Mark, and later of Sarah and David. Since Mark's death, however, I had found participation difficult.

But this year I found myself wholeheartedly singing the carols and listening to the stories of the child born in Bethlehem, angels breaking through darkness to announce the miraculous birth—stories that most New Testament scholars, knowing that we have little or no historical information about Jesus' birth, regard as a mixture of legend and *midrash*, that is, storytelling that draws upon Israel's stories of the miraculous birth of Isaac, of the prophet Samuel, and of the rescue of the infant Moses. On that night, my own associations with those stories seemed to be embraced in the joy and solemnity of the festival, laced, as it is, with intimations of Jesus' impending death as well as the promise of his continuing radiant presence. Attending to the sounds and the silence, the candlelight and darkness, I felt the celebration take us in and break over us like the sea. When it receded, it left me no longer clinging to particular moments in the past but borne upon waves of love and gratitude that moved me toward Sarah, toward the whole community gathered there, at home, or everywhere, the dead and the living. For a moment I was shocked by the thought: We could have made all this up out of what had happened in our own lives; but, of course, we

did not *have to* do that, for, as I realized at once, countless *other* people have already done that, and have woven the stories of innumerable lives into the stories and music, the meanings and visions of Jesus' birth. Thus such celebrations are borne along through all the generations that have shaped and reshaped them, and those that continue to do so, just as encountering the tradition may shape and reshape us.

Many Christians today, however, might ask the same question Irenaeus asked: If spiritual understanding may arise from human experience, doesn't this mean that it is nothing but human invention—and therefore false? According to Irenaeus, it is heresy to assume that human experience is analogous to divine reality, and to infer that each one of us, by exploring our own experience, may discover intimations of truth about God. So, he says, when Valentinus and his disciples opened John's gospel and wanted to understand what *word* means, they reflected on how *word* functions in human experience.¹ What this means, he says, is that they mistook their own projections for theology, so that they found in the Scriptures only what they invented, "each one seeking to validate his own experience."² But Irenaeus himself believed that, on the contrary, whatever we might say about our own experience has nothing to do with God:

So it is that heaping together with a kind of plausibility all human emotions, mental exercises, and formation of intentions, and utterances of words, *they have lied with no plausibility at all against God. For they ascribe the things that happen to human beings, and whatever they recognize themselves as experiencing, to the divine word.*³

Had those heretics been right, Irenaeus continues, we would have no need of revelation; "the coming of the Lord will appear unnecessary and useless, if, indeed, he did come intending to tolerate and preserve each person's ideas concerning God."

What Irenaeus objected to was the refusal of those he calls heretics to acknowledge how utterly unique Jesus is, and thus their tendency to place him with ourselves on the human side of the equation. Irenaeus proclaims the opposite: that God—and Jesus Christ, God's manifestation on earth—wholly transcends human modes of thought and experience. Against those who emphasize our kinship with Jesus Christ, Irenaeus argues that Jesus' transcendence sets him apart from the rest of humanity:

I have shown from the scriptures that *no one of all the sons of Adam is, in his own right, called "God" or named "Lord."* But that *He is himself, and in his own right . . . beyond all men who ever lived, God, and Lord, and Eternal King, and Only-begotten, and Incarnate Logos,* is proclaimed by all the prophets, the apostles, and by the Spirit itself, [and] may be seen by all who have attained to even a modicum of truth.⁴

Furthermore, he adds, "those who say that [Jesus] was merely a human being, begotten by Joseph" show themselves ungrateful to the "word of God, who *became flesh* [John 1:14] for them."⁵ Not only was Jesus' birth—his "spiritual generation from God"—completely different from ordinary human birth but so was his death completely different from ours. For just as he alone was born miraculously from a virgin, so he alone, of the whole

human race, having died, rose bodily from the dead—"rose in the substance of flesh, and *pointed out to his disciples the mark of the nails and the wound in his side.*"⁶

Nevertheless Irenaeus had to respond to a question that many people—Jews as well as "heretics"—apparently asked him: What is *wrong* with seeing Jesus as if he were simply "one of us"? Haven't we all—ourselves as well as he—been created in the image of God? Irenaeus agrees but adds that the original affinity between God and ourselves was obliterated when the human race surrendered to the power of evil. "Although by nature we belonged to the all-powerful God," he explains, the devil, whom he calls "the apostasy," captured and came to dominate the human race and "alienated us [from God], contrary to nature, and made us his own."⁷ Thus we were all in a desperate situation and would have been utterly destroyed had not the divine word descended from heaven to save us; for "there is no other way we could have learned about God unless our Master, existing as the word, had become man"⁸ and shed his blood to redeem us from the evil one.

How, then, could Irenaeus safeguard this essential gospel message—upon which he believed salvation depends? As we have seen, when Irenaeus confronted the challenge of the many spiritual teachers, he acted decisively, by demanding that believers destroy all those "innumerable secret and illegitimate writings"⁹ that his opponents were always invoking, and by declaring that, of all versions of the "gospel" circulating among Christians, only four are genuine. In taking these two momentous—and, as it turned out, enormously influential—steps, Irenaeus became a chief architect of what Christians in later generations called the

New Testament *canon*, a carpenter's term meaning "guideline"—often a string with a weight attached—to check that a wall is straight.¹⁰

Yet Irenaeus himself never applied the term *canon*, as we do, to the collection of writings he called the "four formed gospel," nor to any other list of writings, since he knew that lists of writings don't prevent heresy. After all, Valentinus and his followers often drew their inspiration from the same sources that most Christians revered in common, including Genesis, Paul's letters, and the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Thus Irenaeus was determined to establish an even more authoritative "canon": it was to be a guideline for understanding any writing or preaching—any gospel at all.

Since both he and his opponents started with the "canon of faith received in baptism,"¹¹ how could Irenaeus make sure that all believers would take this to mean what he believed it meant—that Jesus is God incarnate? To do so, he declares that "he will prove the heretics wrong by using their own favorite gospel against them. He intends to establish what he calls the 'canon of truth,' and to produce from his own reading of John—by reformulating the baptismal teaching in language he borrows from that gospel—language that his successors would build into the Nicene Creed, and the creeds that followed. But how did John's teaching that Jesus is God's word in human form become what Irenaeus wanted to make it: the very touchstone of orthodoxy?

This question would be easier to answer if the meaning of John's gospel were obvious. But we have seen how controversial it was among its earliest readers: Irenaeus complains that Valentinus's disciples were "always quoting the Gospel of John,"¹²

while, surprisingly, prominent "fathers of the church," including three of his revered mentors, apparently were not.¹³ Irenaeus probably was aware that his own teacher, Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, may not have known John's gospel; at any rate, he chose not to mention it, so far as we know. Nor is John's gospel mentioned by another martyr Irenaeus revered, Ignatius, bishop of nearby Antioch,¹⁴ nor, for that matter, by Justin Martyr, the Christian philosopher in Rome whose works Irenaeus also admired. He does mention that some Christians, including some who opposed the "new prophecy" movement, rejected John's gospel. Perhaps he knew that the Roman teacher Gaius had called the Gospel of John heretical¹⁵ and charged that it was actually written not by Jesus' disciple but by John's worst enemy, the heretic Cerinthus.¹⁶ Irenaeus was not, however, the first to introduce this gospel into circles of "ecclesiastical" Christians; some years earlier, another of Justin's students, the Syrian Tatian, had included it with several others, including Matthew and Luke, when he rewrote these accounts and other sources into his own composite "gospel"; and the many fragments that remain of Tatian's long version show that it was widely read.¹⁷ Irenaeus himself treats the Gospel of John as part of the tradition he received from his home community in Asia Minor; but while he champions this gospel, and repeats the tradition that "John, the disciple of the Lord,"¹⁸ wrote it while he lived in Ephesus, he must have known that many Christians found it problematic, even suspect.

Why, then, did Irenaeus join the Gospel of John with the three much more widely accepted gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and claim it was an indispensable element of the four formed gospel?¹⁹ And why did he place John not, as Christians

"true light enlightening everyone" [1:9], the *same one* creator of "all things" [1:3], the *same one* "coming to his own" [1:11]; the *same one* that "became flesh, and dwelt among us" [1:14].²²

What Irenaeus's successors would derive from this was a kind of simple, almost mathematical equation, in which God = word = Jesus Christ.²³ That many Christians to this day consider some version of this equation the essence of Christian belief is a mark of Irenaeus's accomplishment—and his success. Irenaeus wants to emphasize this point when he repeats that Jesus Christ *himself* manifests the "one God almighty" who is the "Maker of the universe." And because Irenaeus's bold interpretation came virtually to define orthodoxy, those who read John's gospel today in any language except the Greek original will find that the translations make his conclusion seem obvious—namely, that the man "who dwelt among us" was God incarnate (for discussion of the Greek original, see endnote).²⁴

This, then, is the "canon of truth" which Irenaeus reformulates in language he borrows from John's prologue: that "there is one all-powerful God, who made all things by his word. . . . So the scripture says, 'all things were made through him and without him nothing was made' [John 1:3]."²⁵ Instead of envisioning God on high remote from this world, especially from its deficiencies and sufferings, Irenaeus declares that God manifests himself in and through this world, even choosing to inhabit it himself, as Jesus Christ, the "word made flesh."

Irenaeus argues that this "canon of truth" enables him—and anyone else who uses it—to read not only the gospels but all Scripture in the radical way pioneered by some of his Christian

did later, as the *fourth* gospel but instead as the *first and foremost* pillar of "the church's gospel"? Irenaeus says that the gospel deserves this exalted position because John—and John alone—proclaims Christ's *divine* origin, that is, his

original, powerful and glorious generation from the Father, thus declaring, "*In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God* [John 1:1–2]." Also, "*all things were made through him [the word] and without him nothing was made* [John 1:3]."²⁶

Irenaeus tells us that Valentinus's disciple Ptolemy, reading these words, envisioned God, *word*, and finally Jesus Christ as, so to speak, waves of divine energy flowing down from above; thus, he suggests, the infinite divine Source above reveals itself in diminished form in the *divine word*, which reveals itself, in turn, in the more limited form of the human Jesus.²¹ But Irenaeus declares that such an interpretation misses what we saw in Chapter 2 as the central conviction John wants to convey—that Jesus embodies the *divine word* that comes forth from God and so, on earth, is "Lord and God" to those who recognize him. So Irenaeus challenges Ptolemy's interpretation of John's prologue and argues instead that "God the Father" is equivalent to the *word*, and the *word* is equivalent to "Jesus Christ." He states emphatically that John means there is

One God all powerful and one Jesus Christ, "through whom all things came into being" [John 1:3]; he says, the *same one* "Son of God" [1:14]; the *same one* "only begotten" [1:14, 18]; the *same one* "Maker of all things"; the *same one*

predecessors. Wherever the Jewish Scriptures mention God's word, or even where they mention the *Lord God* himself, Irenaeus now claims to find *Jesus Christ*. So, he argues, when God spoke to Abraham, it was "our Lord, the word of God, who spoke"—not only to Abraham but to all the patriarchs and prophets:

No doubt . . . the Son of God is implanted everywhere throughout his Scriptures; at one time speaking with Abraham; at another time, with Noah, giving him the dimensions of the ark . . . at another time, he directs Jacob on his journey, and speaks with Moses from the burning bush.²⁶

When the prophet Ezekiel saw the Lord surrounded by angels and worshiped in heaven, Irenaeus declares that the One he saw on the throne was *Jesus Christ*.²⁷ Even when Genesis tells how "the Lord took clay from the earth, and formed *adam*" (Genesis 2:7), Irenaeus declares that "the Lord God" who created humankind in Paradise was "our Lord Jesus Christ, who 'was made flesh' [John 1:14] and was hung upon the cross."²⁸

Irenaeus knew that this claim far oversteps anything found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, where, he notes, each pictures Jesus as a man who receives special divine power, as God's "anointed one." Each of these gospel writers assigns Jesus a somewhat different—human—role. Thus, Irenaeus says, Matthew depicts Jesus as God's appointed king and traces his family back to King David;²⁹ Luke emphasizes his role as priest;³⁰ and Mark depicts him primarily as God's prophet.³¹ But each of these gospels stops short of identifying Jesus with God, much less as God. For Irenaeus, however, the Gospel of John does precisely that; as the church father Origen said later, only John

speaks of Jesus' "divinity." Irenaeus, like Origen, took this to mean that John is not only different but also "more elevated," having seen what the others missed; and from this conviction he apparently concluded that only by joining John with the others could the church complete the "fourfold gospel," which teaches that Jesus is God incarnate. Carried away with enthusiasm, Irenaeus identifies personally with the evangelist and declares that "John, the Lord's disciple," wrote this gospel for precisely the same purpose that he himself now was writing his *own* book—namely, to expose "heretics"; to confound those who spread "falsely so-called *gnosis*"; and, above all, "to establish the *canon of truth* in the church."³²

Having set forth his reformulated *canon of truth*—that God the Father is also the Creator who "made all things through his word" (John 1:3), the word that became incarnate in Jesus Christ—Irenaeus turns to the practical question: Who worships God rightly, and who does not? First, he says, the Jews do not, since they refuse to see that "the word of the Lord" which spoke to Abraham and Moses was none other than Jesus Christ. Because they do not identify "the word of the Lord" as Jesus Christ, Irenaeus declares,

the Jews have departed from God, since they have not received his word, but they imagined that they could know the Father . . . without the word, being ignorant of the God who spoke in human form to Abraham and then to Moses.³³

Since they fail to recognize Jesus as "the God who spoke in human form" to their ancestors, Irenaeus says that God disinherited the Jews and stripped them of their right to be his

later to be expanded into the great creeds—that directs how to interpret it. I do not mean to suggest that he set out to deceive his audience. On the contrary, Irenaeus surely shared the conviction that made “orthodox Christianity” so compelling to him, as well as to many other Christians to this day: that “the faithful,” as trustworthy stewards, hand down only what they, in turn, received from the apostles, without adding or subtracting anything from what Irenaeus and others call the *depositum fidei*—the faith that the apostles deposited, as in a bank. By invoking the authority of the ancient consensus of the apostles they can claim, then, that what they teach is not only the *unchanging truth* but absolutely *certain*.³⁷

Irenaeus warns that eternal salvation depends on discriminating between which priests in Christian churches are “genuine” and which are, in his words, “heretics, schismatics, or hypocrites,” and he calls on believers to *obey* the former and *shun* the latter:

Therefore it is necessary to *obey the priests who are in the church*—those who have received the succession from the apostles, as we have shown, and who have also received. . . . *the certain gift of truth . . . but to hold in suspicion those who stand apart from the primary line of succession, and who gather in any place whatsoever, [and to regard them] either as heretics with evil intentions or as schismatics, puffed up with themselves, or as hypocrites.*³⁸

Irenaeus knew that the “disciples of Valentinus” did not oppose the clergy. On the contrary, what made them especially hard for him to discredit was the fact that many of them were priests themselves. Yet he warns believers to beware of those whose

priests. Although they continue to worship, God rejects their offerings as he rejected Cain’s, since, just as Cain killed Abel, so the Jews “killed the Just One,” Jesus, so that “their hands are full of blood.”³⁴

Thus the Jews worship God in vain, for he has transferred their priesthood to those who *did* recognize his “word”³⁵—namely, the apostles whom Jesus taught to offer “the sacrifice of the new covenant,” when he told them to offer the bread he called his body and the wine he called his blood. Ever since Jesus’ death on the cross, the eucharist reenacts his sacrifice is the lightning rod that draws God’s power down to earth. Not only does the eucharist alone offer access to God but, Irenaeus declares, “this pure sacrifice *only the church offers—not the Jews . . . nor any of the assemblies of the heretics.*”³⁶

Since Irenaeus assumed—rightly, no doubt—that few Jews would read what he wrote, much less contest his claim that God rejects their worship, he spent little time arguing that they are excluded. But he did anticipate objections he expected members of his Christian audience to raise: Isn’t the eucharist a holy sacrifice when *any* baptized Christian—or, at least, any priest—offers it as Jesus taught his disciples to do? Irenaeus says no: when heretics offer the eucharist, they do so in vain. For those who accept his canon of truth, what matters is not only to be a *Christian* but to be an *orthodox* Christian—that is, one who “thinks straight.”

Instead of asserting his own authority to interpret the gospel against that of his opponents, Irenaeus identifies his own belief with that of the whole consensus of what he calls “apostolic tradition.” Thus, he insists, “orthodox” Christians are those who uphold the fourfold gospel *together with* the canon of truth—

claims to priestly office are virtually identical to any others' but who actually are *heretics* who "serve only themselves," and not God. He says that believers must be careful to associate only with priests who worship God *rightly*. This means not only that they "teach sound doctrines" but that they speak "sound words" and display "blameless conduct"—in short, they do not hold unauthorized meetings, or claim access to secret teaching, or perform special initiations.

Irenaeus ends his five-volume *Refutation* calling upon his fellow believers to judge and excommunicate heretics. Recalling how God's wrath falls upon the Jews "who became the killers of their Lord," he declares that truly spiritual Christians must also condemn "all the followers of Valentinus," since, although many believers see them as fellow Christians, they actually subvert the faith and, like the Jews, have become "sons of the devil." Finally he contrasts those who take "many deviant paths" with those who "belong to the church," who share

one and the same faith, observe the same precepts, and . . . protect the same form of ecclesiastical constitution . . . in which one and the same path of salvation is demonstrated throughout the world.³⁹

Vividly evoking the final judgment pictured in the Revelation, he leaves the reader with visions of the devil, the antichrist, and all their demonic powers being cast into eternal fire along with all of their human offspring, while the heavenly Jerusalem descends to welcome "the priests and the disciples of the apostles" along with "the faithful."⁴⁰ For Irenaeus, then, and for his successors, *making a difference* between true Christians and those

he calls heretics—and choosing the path of "orthodox" faith and practice—is what ultimately makes the difference between heaven and hell.

We do not know how members of Irenaeus's own congregation reacted to his pleas, although we *do* know how distressed he was that the great majority of Christians initially accepted the Valentinians' view of themselves. While Irenaeus, as bishop, was working to expose them as "wolves in sheeps' clothing"⁴¹ and expel them from the churches, he wrote that most Christians regarded them as among their most influential and advanced members. In his own time, Valentinus had been widely respected as a teacher by his fellow Christians in Rome,⁴² and even a generation later Irenaeus's contemporary the famous Egyptian teacher Clement of Alexandria, as well as Clement's brilliant successor, Origen, engaged in discussion and argument with prominent disciples of Valentinus, and regarded them as fellow Christian teachers. Although Clement and Origen often criticized aspects of Valentinian theology, they also adopted elements of it into their own teaching.⁴³

About twenty years after Irenaeus wrote, Tertullian described how his fellow believers in Carthage reacted when he warned them against joining circles he called heretical:

"How does it happen," they ask, "that this woman or that man, who were *the most faithful, the most circumspect, and the most respected in the church*, have gone over to the other side?"⁴⁴

But Irenaeus was convinced that the presence of the Valentinian Christians was dangerously divisive—that it undermined

affirm the common faith as a first step toward truth but questioned not only what it means but what lies beyond it. Among themselves they not only recognized diversity but expected and welcomed it, as philosophers did in their discussions, as evidence of original and creative insight.⁴⁵ So, Tertullian wrote caustically,

When they consider that "spiritual seed in everyone," whenever they hit upon something new, they immediately call their audacity a spiritual gift—no unity, only diversity! And so we see clearly that most of them disagree with one another, since they are willing to say—and even sincerely—of certain points, "This is not so," and "I take this to mean something different," and "I do not accept that."⁴⁶

Tertullian expressed shock, too, that, as in some philosophic circles, women participated with men: "These heretical women—how audacious they are! They are bold enough to teach, to preach, to take part in almost every masculine function—they may even baptize people!"⁴⁷ While they appreciated diverse viewpoints within their own circles, such Christians may have extended less tolerance and generosity toward the "simple" believers who followed the bishop. Irenaeus wrote that when he directly questioned Valentinians and challenged them, they either remained silent or said that he was simply wrong, since he had not yet advanced beyond a naïve level of understanding.⁴⁸

Irenaeus, for his part, says that when these "absolutely foolish and stupid people" were threatened with excommunication, they sometimes replied that they no longer believed in the God

the preaching of the gospel and the authority of its leaders. He wanted them either to abandon their "heresy" or be cut off from the churches. We do not know how his contemporaries responded; I would guess that the majority, moved by his concern, rallied around Irenaeus and, rather than risk expulsion, chose the safer shelter of the church community and what Irenaeus insisted was the stable authority of the "catholic" consensus of churches and their clergy. In any case, we know that Christians in later generations increasingly followed his lead, as many tried to compel those who persisted in "heresy" either to conform or to separate themselves from the churches. For during the following century and a half, as rapidly growing numbers of converts joined Christian churches despite sporadic outbursts of violent persecution, many bishops adopted and developed the safeguards Irenaeus had outlined to strengthen what he had called the "same form of ecclesiastical constitution" by standardizing basic Christian instruction and excluding those who deviated from the "one . . . path of salvation." During the fourth century, when persecution suddenly gave way to official toleration of Christians under Constantine, and then to the construction of a Christian empire, a coalition of bishops would take up Irenaeus's agenda and attempt to realize his vision of a catholic—that is, universal—orthodox church.

During Irenaeus's lifetime, of course, this astonishing turn of events lay a hundred and fifty years in the future. As we have seen, his Valentinian opponents had never intended to go their own separate way. But many of them rejected the alternatives Irenaeus placed before them: either accept the common faith as "the whole faith" or reject it entirely. Instead, they continued to

whom he invoked as an angry judge ready to cast unbelievers into the fires of hell. Moreover, they questioned his understanding of the Scriptures. Some asked, for example, how one could worship a God who first "hardened the heart of Pharaoh and his servants"⁴⁹ and then punished them by drowning them in the sea. Or how could a just God *refrain* from condemning Lot for impregnating his own daughters when he was drunk?⁵⁰ As we have seen, the author of the Gospel of Truth says that those who come to know the infinite goodness and compassion that belong to "the fullness of God" no longer think of God in terms of such deficient and anthropomorphic images.

Others, including Valentinus's disciple Heracleon, interpreted disparity between Christians in terms not unlike what the psychologist William James would call "varieties of religious experience."⁵¹ Heracleon contrasts two qualitatively different types of conversion experience. He says that the great majority of Christians appeal to God only when they are desperate, and turn to faith only when they see miracles; thus the gospels often depict Jesus as a wonder-worker who heals the sick, raises the dead, and walks on water. Since they experience the human situation—their own situation—as pervaded by suffering and threatened by death, these Christians see Jesus above all as a healer and savior. Heracleon says that John characterizes this kind of conversion when he tells how Jesus, traveling to Galilee, met a ruler who begged him to come down and heal his son, who was desperately ill. Although Jesus rebuked him for the deficiency of his faith ("Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe"), the ruler renewed his pleas: "Sir, come down before my child dies." But after Jesus challenged him to have

faith ("Go: your son will live") and his son recovered, the story concludes that "he himself believed, and all his household."⁵²

This type of conversion experience, Heracleon says, is familiar to those Christians who see God as John pictures this ruler—as a strict, limited, but well-meaning master and father, who has decreed the death penalty for every one of his children who sins and yet loves them and grieves when they perish. But they also believe that, apart from Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, God does not forgive his own children; he actually saves only those who "believe."

One might ask, how *else* could one see God than as divine ruler, father, and judge? And how else could one see Jesus, except as a miracle worker and savior? Isn't that how the gospels depict him? Heracleon says that John tells the story of the "woman at the well" to show, by contrast, how a person gifted with grace experiences conversion. Here John recounts how Jesus, tired from travel, sits down to rest near a well, asks a Samaritan woman who comes to draw water to give him a drink, and offers her, in return, "living water":

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water?" . . . Jesus said to her, "Whoever drinks from this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks from the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I give will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty, nor come here to draw." Jesus said, "Go, call your husband, and come here." . . . Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the

*hour is coming . . . and is now, when the true worshipers will worship the father in spirit and in truth. . . . God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*⁵³

Heracleon explains that for John, as for the prophet Isaiah, *water* means "spiritual nourishment"; thus, the story shows that the woman is aware of spiritual thirst and, not knowing how to satisfy it, she has come to draw water from the "well of Jacob," which signifies traditional ways of worshipping God. But since these leave her thirst unsatisfied, when Jesus offers to reveal the source of a wellspring within herself, she immediately grasps what he means and responds, "Give me this water!"

Heracleon points out that Jesus' answer ("Go, call your husband, and come here")⁵⁴ makes no sense: not only does he not respond to her request but, as the story shows, he knows that she is not married. Bewildered by his words, the woman initially takes them literally and admits that she is unmarried but has lived with six men. Heracleon says that Jesus reveals to her that she has lived this way "through ignorance of God and the needs of her own life."⁵⁵ When he tells her to "call her husband," he is showing her that she already has a "partner" in divine being—that is, a relationship to God of which she is not yet aware. He directs her to call upon resources she already has been given, and to discover her spiritual counterpart, her "fulfillment" (*pleroma* in Greek). Once she recognizes this as an essential part of her being, she may celebrate communion with God as the divine "marriage."

Different as these two types of conversion experience are, they are by no means mutually exclusive. The first sees salvation as deliverance from sin and death; the second shows how

someone "ignorant of God and of [one's] own nature," and mired in destructive activity, eventually develops a growing awareness of—and need for—relationship with God. Heracleon explains that whoever experiences the first type of conversion may—eventually will—also experience the second, which is what Augustine, writing two centuries later, meant when he spoke of "faith seeking understanding."

Heracleon explains that most Christians tend to take literally the images they find in the Scriptures: they see God as the *creator* who made this present world, the *lawgiver* who gave tablets to Moses on Sinai, the divine *father* who begot Jesus. But those who experience God's presence come to see these traditional images of God for what they are—human creations. One need not *reject* such images, Heracleon says, since they provide an essential way of pointing toward divine reality that words cannot express; but one may come to see that all religious language—and much other language—consists of such images. Whoever realizes this comes to worship God, as Jesus says, "in spirit and in truth."⁵⁶

While Irenaeus sought to clarify basic convictions about God and Jesus Christ in theological statements that would become the framework of the fourth-century creeds, Valentinian Christians accorded such theological propositions a much less important role. Instead of regarding these as the essential and certain basis for spiritual understanding—and instead of rejecting them—they treated them as elementary teachings and emphasized instead what Irenaeus mentions only in passing—how far God surpasses human comprehension.

The Secret Book of John, similarly, sets forth what theologians call the *via negativa*, recognizing what *cannot* be known and

discarding misapprehensions about God. Nevertheless, the Secret Book says that human beings have an innate capacity to know God but one that offers only hints and glimpses of divine reality.⁵⁷ The Secret Book suggests that the story of Eve's birth from Adam's side speaks of the awakening of this spiritual capacity. Instead of simply telling about the origin of woman, this story, symbolically read, shows how the "blessed one above, the Father" (or, in some versions of the text, the "Mother-Father"), feeling compassion for Adam, sent him

a "helper"—luminous *epinoia* ["creative" or "inventive" consciousness] which comes out of him, who is called Life [Eve]; and she "helps" the whole creation, by working with him, and by restoring him to his full being, and by teaching him about the descent of his kind, and by showing the way to ascend, the way he came down.⁵⁸

Thus Eve symbolizes the gift of spiritual understanding, which enables us to reflect—however imperfectly—upon divine reality. Another book discovered at Nag Hammadi, On the Origin of the World, says that when the first man and woman recognized their nakedness, "they saw that they were naked of spiritual understanding [*gnosis*]." But then the luminous *epinoia* "appeared to them shining with light, and awakened their consciousness."⁵⁹

The Secret Book intends this story to show that we have a latent capacity within our hearts and minds that links us to the divine—not in our ordinary state of mind but when this hidden capacity awakens. Because the term *epinoia* has no precise equivalent in English, I shall leave it in Greek. To speak of various modes of consciousness susceptible to revelation, the au-

thor of the Secret Book invokes a cluster of words related to the Greek verb *noein*, which means "perceive," "think," or "be aware." The Secret Book explains that, although God is essentially incomprehensible, the powers that reveal God to humankind include *pronoia* (anticipatory awareness), *ennoia* (internal reflection), and *prognosis* (foreknowledge or intuition), all personified as feminine presences, presumably because of the gender of the Greek words. But according to the Secret Book it is, above all, the "luminous *epinoia*" that conveys genuine insight. We might translate this as "imagination," but many people take this term as Irenaeus did, to refer to fantasy rather than conscious awareness. Yet as the Secret Book envisions it, *epinoia* (and related modes of awareness) remains an ambiguous, limited—but indispensable—gift. When John asks whether everyone receives the luminous *epinoia*, the savior answers yes—"The power will descend upon every person, for without it, no one can stand"—⁶⁰ and adds that *epinoia* strengthens those who love her by enabling them to discriminate between good and evil, so that moral insight and ethical power are inseparable from spiritual understanding: "When the spirit of life increases, and the power comes and strengthens that soul, no one can any longer deceive it with works of evil."⁶¹

The author of the Secret Book stresses that the insights this spiritual intuition conveys are neither complete nor certain; instead, *epinoia* conveys hints and glimpses, images and stories, that imperfectly point beyond themselves toward what we cannot now fully understand. Thus the author knows that these very stories—those told in the Secret Book—are to be taken neither literally nor too seriously; for these, too, are merely glimpses that, as Paul says, we now know only "in a mirror, darkly."⁶² Yet, however incomplete, these glimpses suffice to reveal the pres-

ence of the divine, for the Secret Book says that, apart from spiritual intuition, "people grow old without joy . . . and die . . . without knowing God."⁶³

How is it, then, that many people remain oblivious to *epinoia*? To answer this question, the Secret Book tells a story intended to show that although the creator-god pictured in Genesis is *himself* only an anthropomorphic image of the divine Source that brought forth the universe, many people mistake this deficient image for God. This story tells how the creator-god himself, being unaware of the "blessed one, the Mother-Father, the blessed and compassionate One" above, boasted that he was the only God ("I am a jealous God; there is none other besides me").⁶⁴ Intent on maintaining sole power, he tried to control his human creatures by forbidding them to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But when Adam and Eve disobeyed him, and chose to seek knowledge of the divine Source above, he realized that they had listened to their inner resource, the luminous *epinoia*. As soon as the creator-god realized what they had done, he retaliated; first he punished them both, and even cursed the earth itself because of them;⁶⁵ then he tried to force the woman to subject herself to the man, saying, "Your husband shall rule over you";⁶⁶ and, finally, "all his angels cast them out of Paradise,"⁶⁷ burdening them with "bitter fate" and with daily cares to make them oblivious to the "luminous *epinoia*."⁶⁸

But this is a mythical explanation. Can we find a more practical reason for the suppression of the "luminous *epinoia*"? I suggest that the author of the Secret Book knew how Christians like Irenaeus challenged those who spoke of the "God beyond God," and insisted that everyone worship only the creator. But while Valentinus's followers often met such challenges with silence,

the author of the Secret Book returns the challenge in stories such as this one that are meant to show how—and why—such leaders, in the name of the God they serve, consign spiritual Christians to hell. The Secret Book suggests that those who worship God only as creator—including most Christians—share his animosity toward spiritual awareness, and also toward those who speak for its presence in human experience. The story of the creator's hostility to *epinoia*, then, is a parable, both comic and painful, of conflict between those who seek spiritual intuition and those who suppress it.

Irenaeus, shocked and distressed by such readings of Genesis, protests that his opponents place far too little confidence in traditional sources of revelation—and far too much in their own imagination:

To what distance above God do you lift up your imaginations, you rash and inflated people? . . . God cannot be measured in the heart, and in the mind he is incomprehensible—he who holds the earth in the hollow of his hand. Who knows the measure of his right hand? Who knows his finger? Or do you understand his hand—that hand which measures immensity? For his hand lays hold of all things, and illumines the heavens, and also the things below the heavens, and tests the reins and the hearts, and is present in mysteries and in our secret thoughts, and does openly nourish and sustain us. . . . Yet, as if now they had measured and thoroughly investigated him . . . they pretend that beyond [God] there is . . . another Father—certainly they are not looking up to heavenly things, as they claim, but really descending into a profound abyss of insanity.⁶⁹

only to those he called the "ministers of the lawful and most holy catholic religion."⁷⁴ The emperor also offered tax relief and, later, tax exemptions to clergy who qualified—while threatening to increase taxes for anyone guilty of founding "heretical" churches. About ten years later, apparently responding to what he considered abuses of these privileges, he wrote a new order to specify that

the privileges that have been granted in consideration of religion *must benefit only the adherents of the catholic faith* [or "law"]. It is Our will, furthermore, that *heretics and schismatics shall not only be alien from these privileges but also shall be bound and subjected to various compulsory public services.*⁷⁵

Besides allocating money to repair damaged churches, Constantine ordered new ones to be built, including, tradition says, a magnificent Church of St. Peter on the Vatican hill in Rome⁷⁶ and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. In 324 he wrote to the eastern bishops, urging them to "ask without hesitation whatever [funds] you find to be necessary"⁷⁷ from the imperial treasury. He assured them that he had already ordered his finance minister to give them whatever they asked to build new churches and fit them with the splendor appropriate to honor the God of the universe. Constantine also delegated to certain bishops the distribution of the imperial grain supply and other necessities to support people in need, so that they might fulfill Jesus' admonitions to care for the sick, the needy, and the destitute, as well as those who had suffered torture, imprisonment, or exile during the years of persecution.⁷⁸ Further-

But it would take more than theological argument for Irenaeus's viewpoint to prevail in churches throughout the world: it would take, in fact, the revolution initiated by the Roman emperor Constantine. In his famous *History of the Church*, Eusebius of Caesarea, a bishop in Palestine who survived years of persecution in which many of his friends and fellow Christians died, wrote how God miraculously intervened on October 28, 312, by revealing Christ's sign in the heavens to the pagan emperor Constantine and gaining his allegiance.⁷⁹ Eusebius then tells how, in the years that followed, Constantine declared amnesty for Christians and became their imperial patron. But this practical military leader chose to recognize only those who belonged to what may have become, by his time, the best-organized and largest group, which he called the "lawful and most holy catholic church."⁸¹

Constantine's recognition carried with it, of course, enormous benefits. In 313 the emperor ordered that anyone who had confiscated property from "the catholic church of the Christians in any city, or even in other places," during the persecutions of the previous decades must return it immediately to "these same churches"⁸² and offer compensation for any damages. Eusebius of Caesarea marveled that in this astonishing new era "bishops constantly received even personal letters from the emperor, and honors, and gifts of money."⁸³ Eusebius includes in his history a letter Constantine wrote the same year to the proconsul of Africa to say that he was exempting Christian clergy from financial obligations incumbent on ordinary citizens; but, since he knew that the African churches were divided into rival factions, he specified that these privileges applied

the interested reader.⁸¹ For our purposes here, even the briefest summary would have to note how, during the transitional decades after 312, Constantine subjected the Roman empire to a massive restructuring and shifted the underpinnings of imperial power. What he did—and did gradually, in order to minimize opposition from powerful senators—was transfer the empire's basic allegiance from the traditional guardians of its welfare, the gods of Rome, to the foreign god worshiped by those whom his predecessors had persecuted for atheism.⁸² It was at this critical time that Constantine convened the international council of bishops to meet at Nicaea, "because of the excellent temperature of the air,"⁸³ in the early days of June 325. The emperor himself attended the council and participated in it, telling his guests at one of the lavish state dinners that he believed God had appointed him "bishop [the Greek term means "supervisor"] of those outside the church."⁸⁴ Although in the past many historians assumed that Constantine directed—even dictated—the entire proceedings, more careful historical investigation has shown that he not only allowed but expected the bishops themselves to arbitrate disputes and to forge a working consensus among rival parties. When he addressed those who gathered at Nicaea, he urged them to resolve their differences "lest private animosities interfere with God's business."⁸⁵

One of the conflicts he hoped to resolve had been troubling churches throughout the empire for several years. As rival Christian groups vied to gain ascendancy in a changed world, the question was no longer *whether* the "catholic church" would prevail against "heretics and schismatics" but *who* would succeed in claiming to embody that catholic church. In Egypt, a group of

more, while transforming the status of Christians, Constantine's revolution changed the status of Jews. As Timothy Barnes, one of the foremost contemporary historians of these events, writes, "Constantine translated Christian prejudice against Jews into legal disabilities."⁷⁹ He forbade Jews to enter Jerusalem, except on the one day a year they were to mourn for having lost it, and ordered them not to seek or accept converts to Judaism. Moreover, Constantine "prescribed that any Jew who attempted forcibly to prevent conversion from Judaism to Christianity should be burned alive."⁸⁰

To strengthen his own alliance with church leaders and to unify fractious Christian groups into one harmonious structure, Constantine charged bishops from churches throughout the empire to meet at his expense at Nicaea, an inland city, near a large lake, to work out a standard formulation of Christian faith. From that meeting and its aftermath, during the tumultuous decades that followed, emerged the Nicene Creed that would effectively clarify and elaborate the "canon of truth," along with what we call the canon—the list of twenty-seven writings which would become the New Testament. Together these would help establish what Irenaeus had envisioned—a worldwide communion of "orthodox" Christians joined into one "catholic and apostolic" church.

How that happened is far more complex than can be related here. I hesitate even to mention the extraordinary events of the fourth century, since no short sketch can adequately describe them; yet I offer one, since these events no doubt are linked to the history we have been exploring. Fortunately, several outstanding historians have written accounts available for

from Light, true God from true God"; that he was "begotten, not made," that is, borrowing John's term, God's "only begotten" offspring (not "made," as were all beings whom God *created*, angels and humans alike).⁸⁶

The next phrase, upon which Alexander and his allies had agreed in advance, proved explosively controversial. To exclude Arius's view that Christ was divine but not in the same sense as God, they insisted on adding that Christ was "*of one being with*"—essentially no different from—God the Father. While the great majority of bishops "were prepared to accept almost any formula that would secure harmony within the church,"⁸⁷ those who opposed this phrase pointed out that it occurs neither in the Scriptures nor in Christian tradition. Is it not extreme, they asked, and contrary to the gospels, to say that Jesus Christ is essentially "the same" as God the Father? But those who insisted that he was carried the day; and no doubt it mattered that Constantine, perhaps frustrated by so much time spent wrangling over a phrase, urged the bishops to include it and end the argument. Now that Constantine had endorsed the term, anyone who challenged it might seem to be questioning the orthodoxy of the emperor himself. In any case, all those present signed the document except the few who chose instead to leave: Arius himself, along with some priests and two bishops from Libya who remained loyal to him. Later, however, the inclusion of this phrase intensified controversy among Christians that continued for decades—indeed, for generations (and, some would say, for centuries).

Eventually the Nicene Creed, approved by the bishops and endorsed by Constantine himself, would become the official doctrine that all Christians henceforth must accept in order to

bishops headed by Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and later by his successor Athanasius, took up and extended Ireneaus's agenda. It was he, in fact, who would interpret and update for his contemporaries the "orthodox" side of the controversy earlier engaged in the gospels of Thomas and John. An intense, combative, and single-minded young man, Athanasius, who served as the bishop's secretary, was about eighteen when Alexander engaged in—some would say he started—a conflict that soon divided churches from Egypt to Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine. Around 318, Alexander had heard that a member of his clergy in Alexandria, a popular Libyan priest named Arius, was preaching that the Word of God, while divine, was not divine in the same way as God the Father. Soon afterward Alexander convened a council of Egyptian bishops to declare Arius's views heretical and excommunicate him, along with all priests and bishops who sided with him, from the church in Alexandria.

This action ignited new controversy. Hearing of Arius's expulsion, bishops in Syria, Palestine, and Asia Minor convened their own councils, several of which declared Arius's teaching not only faithful to catholic tradition but entirely orthodox. Although many bishops urged Alexander to accept Arius back into his church, he adamantly refused. When Alexander and Athanasius received Constantine's summons to Nicaea, to formulate a creed for the "universal" church, they arrived determined to make sure that the carefully chosen—and hotly contested—theological phrases placed there would confess Christ, the Word, as God. They must have been pleased with the result: the formula upon which the majority finally voted, after intense argument, proclaimed that Jesus Christ was "God from God, Light

"the people." Thus, he suggests, Athanasius's claim that the Son is entirely equal with the Father implies that the bishops' authority is equal to that of the emperor himself. Peterson says that this position correlates with Athanasius's refusal to take orders from any emperor, and pervaded the power struggles that characterized the relationship between emperors and bishops in the West throughout the middle ages. Conversely, he says, Arius's formulation, which acknowledges the Father's priority over the Son, survived for centuries in altered form in some of the Eastern churches, which tended to accept imperial power over church affairs, and later would influence the structure of what became "state churches."⁹¹ Whether or not we accept this analysis, we can see that during the decades after the council intense conflict broke out between those who rallied behind Athanasius's position and those who sided with Arius—conflict that engulfed Constantine's sons and grandsons when they succeeded him as emperor and divided bishops and congregations throughout the empire.

As a result, for the next forty years, Athanasius's own position, challenged by those he called Arian Christians—or, as he liked to say, Ariomaniacs—was by no means secure. Although Constantine initially supported Athanasius as Alexander's successor, seven years later he took the side of his opponents and ratified the decision of a council of bishops to depose Athanasius. Forced into exile, Athanasius returned after Constantine's death in 337 to reclaim his position, but two years later he was again deposed by a council of bishops and hid out among his supporters while Bishop Gregory from Cappadocia took over as bishop. Nearly ten years later, when Gregory died, Athanasius returned and reclaimed his office for three more years; but in

participate in the only church recognized by the emperor—the "catholic church." A year before the bishops met at Nicaea, Constantine had tried to legislate an end to "heretical sects," which, by one estimate, may have included about half the Christians in the empire.⁸⁸ The emperor ordered all "heretics and schismatics" to stop meeting, even in private houses, and to surrender their churches and whatever property they owned to the catholic church. Although many Christians associated with teachers such as Valentinus, Marcion, and the prophet Montanus ignored the law,⁸⁹ and magistrates often failed to enforce it, such legislation lent enormous support to the network of catholic churches.

When Alexander died and Athanasius succeeded him as bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius campaigned tirelessly to induce Christians all over Egypt to unite under this creed, as Irenaeus had envisioned. Constantine's own hopes were more modest; he hoped that the Nicene Creed would offer the basic framework upon which Christians could agree, while allowing room for discussion and disagreement, so long as these did not destroy the fabric of the "universal" church, for, as Barnes observes,

Constantine believed that all people should be Christian, but that Christians might legitimately hold divergent opinions on theological questions, and that sensible Christians could disagree about doctrine in a spirit of brotherly love.⁹⁰

Some scholars have suggested that these theological disputes were essentially political. The historian Erik Peterson points out that many Christians associated God the Father with the emperor, Jesus Christ with the bishops, and the holy spirit with

liest known list of the twenty-seven books he calls the "books of the New Testament," beginning with "the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John," and proceeding to the same list of writings attributed to apostles that constitute the New Testament today. Praising these as the "springs of salvation," he calls upon Christians during this Lenten season to "cleanse the church from every defilement" and to reject "the apocryphal books," which are "filled with myths, empty, and polluted"—books that, he warns, incite conflict and lead people astray. It is likely that one or more of the monks who heard his letter read at their monastery near the town of Nag Hammadi decided to defy Athanasius's order and removed more than fifty books from the monastery library, hid them in a jar to preserve them, and buried them near the cliff where Muhammad 'Alī would find them sixteen hundred years later.

Although Athanasius intended the "canon of truth," now enshrined in the Nicene Creed, to safeguard "orthodox" interpretation of Scripture, his experience of Christians who disagreed with him showed that these "heretics" could still read the "canonical Scriptures" in ways he considered unorthodox. To prevent such readings, he insists that anyone who reads the Scriptures must do so through *dianoia*—the capacity to discern the *meaning* or *intention* implicit in each text. Above all, he warns believers to shun *epinoia*.⁹⁵ What others revere as spiritual intuition Athanasius declares is a deceptive, all-too-human capacity to think subjectively, according to one's preconceptions. *Epinoia* leads only to error—a view that the "catholic church" endorsed then and holds to this day.

Finally, lest anyone seek direct access to God through the "image of God" formed within us in creation, Athanasius took

349 he was again deposed and replaced by another bishop from Cappadocia. After his third successful rival, having presided as bishop of Alexandria for five years, was lynched in 361, Athanasius succeeded in regaining his position, which he held tenaciously until his death in 373.

Despite such opposition—and perhaps because of it—Athanasius resolved to bring all Egyptian Christians, however diverse, under the supervision of his office. After working to gain the support of ascetic women,⁹² he began the more difficult task of establishing his authority over various groups of monks and "holy men," including those who lived in communal monasteries that Pachomius, a former soldier turned monk, had founded throughout Egypt since the legalization of Christianity.⁹³ In the spring of 367, when Athanasius was in his sixties and more securely established as bishop, he wrote what became his most famous letter. In a world much different from that of Irenaeus, Athanasius included in his annual Easter Letter detailed instructions that would extend and implement the guidelines his predecessor had sketched out nearly two hundred years before. First, he said, since heretics

*have tried to set in order for themselves the so-called apocryphal books and to mix these with the divinely inspired Scripture . . . which those who were eyewitnesses and helpers of the Word handed down to our ancestors, it seemed good to me . . . to set forth in order the canonized and transmitted writings . . . believed to be divine books;*⁹⁴

After listing the twenty-two books that he says are "believed to be the Old Testament," Athanasius proceeds to offer the ear-

care to block this path as well. In his famous and rhetorically powerful work *On the Incarnation of the Word*, he explains that, although God originally created Adam in his own image, human sin has damaged that image beyond human capacity to repair (a view that Augustine later developed into his understanding of "original sin"). Consequently, there is now only *one* single being who embodies the divine image, and that is the Word of God himself, Jesus Christ:

Since humankind made in God's image was disappearing, . . . what is the use of humankind originally having been made in God's image? . . . *No one else could re-create the likeness of God's image for human beings except [Jesus Christ], the Image of the Father.*⁸⁶

While Arius urged believers to emulate Christ, Athanasius declares this effort not only difficult but impossible, even blasphemous: on the contrary, he famously proclaims, "*God became human so that humankind might become divine.*" All that a human being can do—*must* do—is believe and receive the salvation that God alone can offer. Thus Athanasius extended what Irenaeus taught: whoever seeks access to God must first have recourse to the Word, whom the believer approaches initially through baptism, by confessing the orthodox faith as contained in the statements of the creed, and by receiving the sacraments—the "medicine of immortality" offered wherever orthodox Christians worship together in church.

Even as a persecuted movement, Christianity had become increasingly visible in cities throughout the empire. During the

third and early fourth century, some groups even built their own churches, as the number of converts more than doubled or tripled.⁸⁷ Many, no doubt, were persuaded of the truth of Christian faith by the miraculous events that followed Constantine's conversion. No wonder, then, that after 313 many more crowded the churches, not only those seeking some advantage by joining what would become the emperor's church but also, no doubt, others who, although attracted to Christianity, previously had hesitated to receive baptism lest they place themselves and their families in danger. What such converts wanted was not only to share in the promise of divine salvation and eternal life in the next world but also, in this one, to join the "particular Christian society" committed to living according to Christ's precepts—or, at least, according to modified versions of them. Many found in what earlier was a radical alternative to the Roman order a vision of transformed human relationships that now promised to embrace not only home and church but the whole of human society.

This sketch of what happened during the fourth century does not support the simplistic view often expressed by historians in the past—namely, that catholic Christianity prevailed only because it received imperial patronage, or that people participated because their leaders somehow succeeded in coercing them.⁸⁸ Several historians have persuasively argued instead that Constantine's decision to affiliate himself with the Christian churches demonstrates the enormous appeal that the Christian movement had held for an increasing numbers of converts long before it was safe to join.⁸⁹ Nor does this sketch support the view that Constantine simply used Christianity for cynical purposes.

We do not know his motives, but his actions suggest that he believed he had found in Christ an all-powerful divine patron and the promise of eternal life; and during the thirty years he ruled after that, he legislated, to the extent he considered practical, the moral values he found in biblical sources—the vision of a harmonious society, built upon divine justice, that shows concern even for its poorest members.

Although Constantine's revolution lent support to the claims of catholic bishops that their church, triumphant through God's grace, alone offered salvation, we would be naïve to suppose that Christianity now became, in fact, uniform and homogeneous. Even a glance at the controversies and challenges of the fourth and fifth centuries shows that it did not.¹⁰⁰ What this revolution did accomplish was to enhance the authority of the bishops identified as catholic and to establish their consensus, expressed through the statements of the creed, as defining the boundaries of the newly legitimate faith. To this day, someone who asks, "Are you a Christian?" is likely to follow with questions about propositional beliefs: "Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you believe that Jesus Christ came down from heaven to save you from sin?"

The framework of canon, creed, and ecclesiastical hierarchy that Irenaeus and others began to forge in the crucible of persecution and that his successors like Athanasius worked to construct after Constantine's conversion now gained enormous appeal. The "universal" church could invite potential converts to join an assembly that not only claimed to possess certain truth and to offer eternal salvation but had also become socially acceptable, even politically advantageous. Furthermore,

the structure of Christian orthodoxy has proven remarkably durable and adaptable through two millennia and is developing new forms even today throughout the world, in areas notably including Africa, North and South America, South Korea, and China.

Scholars who investigate the origins of Christianity now see, however, that the landscape we are exploring has opened up unexpected vistas. The Nag Hammadi discoveries and sources such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, along with the work of many historians today, are opening up not only Christianity as we knew it but much that lay beyond its boundaries—as we used to define them.

The events sketched here obviously affect the way we understand our cultural history. But for those of us who find ourselves implicated in this history, as I do, untangling some of its complex strands has practical consequences as well as intellectual ones. In my own case, the hardest—and the most exciting—thing about research into Christian beginnings has been to unlearn what I thought I knew, and to shed presuppositions I had taken for granted.

This research offers new ways to relate to religious tradition. Orthodox doctrines of God—Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—tend to emphasize the separation between what is divine and what is human: in the words of the scholar of religion Rudolph Otto, God is "wholly other" than humankind. Since those who accept such views often assume that divine revelation is diametrically opposed to human perception, they often rule out what

whether Roman Catholic or Baptist, Lutheran or Greek Orthodox, Pentecostalist or Presbyterian, Jehovah's Witness or Christian Scientist—or only the group within their church with which they agree—actually remains faithful to Jesus' teaching. Furthermore, since Christian tradition teaches that Jesus fully revealed God two thousand years ago, innovators from Francis of Assisi to Martin Luther, from George Fox and John Wesley to contemporary feminist and liberation theologians, often have disguised innovation—sometimes even from themselves—by claiming that they are not introducing anything new but only clarifying what Jesus actually meant all along.

Necessary as it seemed to Irenaeus in the second century to expel Valentinus's disciples as "heretics," doing so not only impoverished the churches that remained but also impoverished those he expelled. Uprooted from their original home within Christian churches, those stigmatized as "heretics" often wandered alone—despite the fact that the spiritual inquiry that engaged them found in Judaism and Christianity not only communities of origin but also primary sources of inspiration.

What such people seek, however, is often not a different "system of doctrines" so much as insights or intimations of the divine that validate themselves in experience—what we might call hints and glimpses offered by the luminous *epinoia*. Some engaged on such a path pursue it in solitude; others also participate in various forms of worship, prayer, and action. Engaging in such a process requires, of course, faith. The Greek term for *faith* is the same one often interpreted simply as *belief*, since faith often *includes* belief, but it involves much more: the trust that enables us to commit ourselves to what we hope and

mystically inclined Jews and Christians have always done—seeking to discern spiritual truth experienced as revelation, truth that may come from intuition, reflection, or creative imagination. Christian leaders who deny that such experience can teach us anything about God have often identified themselves as guardians of an unchanging tradition, whose "faithfulness" consists in handing down only what they received from ancient witnesses, neither adding nor subtracting anything. And while church leaders believe that this view of their role expresses appropriate humility, some also understand that it invests them, as guardians of divine truth, with God's own authority.

Such leaders could not, of course, ban the imagination entirely—nor was this their intention. But they effectively channeled the religious imagination of most Christians to express—and to support—what they already taught. The two-thousand-year legacy of Christian music, art, architecture, poetry, philosophy, and theology is, of course, enormously rich, and our culture is inconceivable apart from Christian tradition.

But those who see Christianity as offering, in Irenaeus's words, a "very complete system of doctrines" that contain "certain truth" often have difficulty acknowledging—much less welcoming—diverse viewpoints, which, nevertheless, abound. Anyone who stands within the Roman Catholic communion, for example, knows that it embraces members who differ on topics ranging from doctrine to discipline, and the same applies, of course, to virtually every other Christian denomination. But since Christians often adopt Irenaeus's view of controversy, many tend to assume that only one side can speak the truth, while others speak only lies—or evil. Many still insist that only their church,

own to make a path where none exists. What I have come to love in the wealth and diversity of our religious traditions—and the communities that sustain them—is that they offer the testimony of innumerable people to spiritual discovery. Thus they encourage those who endeavor, in Jesus' words, to "seek, and you shall find."¹⁰⁴

love.¹⁰¹ We noted how Tertullian ridiculed those who saw themselves more as seekers than as believers, "Since they are willing to say—and even sincerely— . . . 'This is not so,' and 'I take this to mean something different,' and 'I do not accept that.'"¹⁰² Despite his inference that those who make such discriminations are either foolish or arrogant, it is not only "heretics" who choose which elements of tradition to accept and practice and which to reject. The sociologist Peter Berger points out that everyone who participates in such tradition today chooses among elements of tradition; for, like Judaism and other ancient traditions, Christianity has survived for thousands of years as each generation relives, reinvents, and transforms what it received.¹⁰³

This act of choice—which the term *heresy* originally meant—leads us back to the problem that orthodoxy was invented to solve: How can we tell truth from lies? What is genuine, and thus connects us with one another and with reality, and what is shallow, self-serving, or evil? Anyone who has seen foolishness, sentimentality, delusion, and murderous rage disguised as God's truth knows that there is no easy answer to the problem that the ancients called discernment of spirits. Orthodoxy tends to distrust our capacity to make such discriminations and insists on making them for us. Given the notorious human capacity for self-deception, we can, to an extent, thank the church for this. Many of us, wishing to be spared hard work, gladly accept what tradition teaches.

But the fact that we have no simple answer does not mean that we can evade the question. We have also seen the hazards—even terrible harm—that sometimes result from unquestioning acceptance of religious authority. Most of us, sooner or later, find that, at critical points in our lives, we must strike out on our