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Inventing the Individual  
*The Origins of Western Liberalism*

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## *Prologue: What is the West About?*

Does it still make sense to talk about ‘the West’? People who live in the nations once described as part of Christendom – what many would now call the post-Christian world – seem to have lost their moral bearings. We no longer have a persuasive story to tell ourselves about our origins and development. There is little narrative sweep in our view of things. For better or worse, things have just happened to us.

Some may welcome this condition, seeing it as liberation from historical myths such as the biblical story of human sin and redemption or a belief in progress ‘guaranteed’ by the development of science. Others will argue that a more inclusive narrative about globalization has made anything like a Western narrative not only obsolete but also morally dubious.

I cannot agree. If we look at the West against a global background, the striking thing about our situation is that we are in a competition of beliefs, whether we like it or not.

The development of Islamic fundamentalism – and the terrorist movements it sometimes inspires – is the most obvious example. A view of the world in which religious law excludes a secular sphere and in which the subordination of women compromises belief in human equality is incompatible with moral intuitions widespread in the West. And that is only one example. The transmuting of Marxist socialism into quasi-capitalism in the world’s largest country, China, provides another. In China the governing ideology has become a crass form of utilitarianism, enshrining majority interests even at the expense of justice or human liberty. That, too, offends some of our deepest intuitions.

But do these intuitions mean that the West can still be defined in terms of shared beliefs? It can offer beliefs usually described as

‘liberal’. But here we immediately encounter a problem. For in the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists, and indeed in the eyes of not a few in the West, liberalism has come to stand for ‘non-belief’ – for indifference and permissiveness, if not for decadence. Why is that? And is the charge justified?

This book is an attempt to find out. Its argument rests on two assumptions. The first is that if we are to understand the relationship between beliefs and social institutions – that is, to understand ourselves – then we have to take a very long view. Deep moral changes, changes in belief, can take centuries to begin to modify social institutions. It is folly to expect popular habits and attitudes to change overnight.

The second assumption is that beliefs are nonetheless of primary importance, an assumption once far more widely held than it is today. In the nineteenth century there was a prolonged contest between ‘idealist’ and ‘materialist’ views of historical change, with the latter holding that social order rests not so much on shared beliefs but on technology, economic interdependence and an advanced social division of labour. Even the declining appeal of Marxism in the later twentieth century did not discredit that view. Rather, in a strange afterlife, Marxism infiltrated liberal thinking, creating a further temptation to downgrade the role of beliefs. That temptation became all the greater because of the unprecedented prosperity enjoyed by the West after the Second World War. We have come to worship at the shrine of economic growth.

This book, by contrast, will take moral beliefs as seriously as possible, by looking at a series of ‘moments’ when changed beliefs began to impact on social relations over a period of nearly two millennia. That is not to say that beliefs have been the only cause at work. The story of Western development is not simple or unilinear. No cause has been uniquely powerful at all times. Nonetheless, it seems to me that moral beliefs *have* given a clear overall ‘direction’ to Western history.

So I tell a story about how the ‘individual’ became the organizing social role in the West – that is, how the ‘civil society’ which we take for granted emerged, with its characteristic distinction between public and private spheres and its emphasis on the role of conscience and choice. It is a story about the slow, uneven and difficult steps which

have led to individual moral agency being publicly acknowledged and protected, with equality before the law and enforceable ‘basic’ rights.

A fundamental change in moral belief shaped the world we live in. But this is not to say that those who introduced or promoted that change foresaw or desired its eventual social consequences. My story is, in part, about the unintended consequences of that change of belief. Tracing those consequences is an important part of the story of Western liberalism.

Today many people in the West describe themselves as Christians, without regularly going to church or having even a rudimentary knowledge of Christian doctrine. Is this just hypocrisy or ignorance? Perhaps not. It may suggest that people have a sense that the liberal secular world they live in – and for the most part endorse – is a world shaped by Christian beliefs. If so, by describing themselves in that way, they are paying tribute to the origins of their moral intuitions.

Is it mere coincidence that liberal secularism developed in the Christian West? This book is an attempt to answer that question. Telling a story about the development of a concept over two millennia is, to say the least, not fashionable. Understandably, historians have become nervous of anything like teleological argument, surveying the damage done by historicist theories of ‘progress’ put forward in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I have tried to avoid that danger.

Nor is that the only danger. The division of intellectual labour and the sheer accumulation of knowledge today pose a great risk for anyone trying to pick a way through such a long period. Specialists are bound to have reservations, noticing omissions and distortions, if not outright mistakes. But must we abandon the attempt to identify and follow longer threads in historical development? In my view, that would be too high a price to pay.

Inevitably, this book is a work of interpretation rather than of primary scholarship. It draws on sources which I have found to be the most penetrating and original, selected from the myriad of sources available. The process of selection has, I am sure, left many valuable sources aside. Nonetheless, there are a number of historians, living and dead, whose writings strike me as both towering achievements and crucial aids in pursuing answers to the questions I explore. I am greatly indebted to their example. They are the real heroes of this

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book: Fustel de Coulanges, François Guizot, Brian Tierney, Harold Berman and Peter Brown. If this book does nothing more than draw their writings to the attention of a wider readership, it will have achieved something. Yet my hope is that this book may also contribute to a better understanding of that liberal tradition which is at the core of Western identity.

A lifetime of reading, conversation and argument has shaped the pages that follow. Some of the most important friendships which have influenced me are now, alas, matters of memory: friendships with Paul Fried, Myron Gilmore, John Plamenatz, Isaiah Berlin and John Burrow. Burrow read the larger part of the manuscript before his death, providing, as always, comments that were penetrating, helpful and witty. Others who have read and commented on virtually the whole manuscript include Guglielmo Verdirame, Henry Mayr-Harting, Diarmaid MacCulloch and Edward Skidelsky. Their comments and criticisms have been invaluable. To Guglielmo and to Henry Newman I owe a special debt – for innumerable evenings when conversation ranged over all the issues of our time. Their generosity and loyalty helped to make this book possible.

Finally, I want to salute Ruth Dry, at Keble College, Oxford, whose patience in the face of the successive revisions of the manuscript has been remarkably good-humoured.

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# The World Turned Upside Down: Paul

At the core of ancient thinking we have found the assumption of natural inequality. Whether in the domestic sphere, in public life or when contemplating the cosmos, Greeks and Romans did not see anything like a level playing field. Rather, they instinctively saw a hierarchy or pyramid.

Different levels of social status reflected inherent differences of being. The paterfamilias, priest or citizen did not have to win or justify his status. His superior status reflected his 'nature'. It was self-justifying. And so entrenched was this vision of hierarchy that the processes of the physical world were also understood in terms of graduated essences and purposes – 'the music of the spheres'. Reason or logos provided the key to both social and natural order. Thought and being, it was assumed, were correlative. Each, in the end, provided the guarantee for the other. These assumptions about reason ensured that the categories of the mind could, in a sense, 'command' reality, even when that involved defining an immutable order or 'fate'.

Natural inequality meant, however, that rationality was not equally distributed among mankind. The distractions of the senses, vagaries of desire, the snares of imagination – all of these drastically restricted the distribution of rational understanding. Nor could the social role especially identified with rationality – that of the citizen – always be counted on to deliver it. A life governed by reason required that the pride given by status be joined to discipline and self-denial. For Plato, only a select few, the guardians, were able to leave behind the unreliable world of sensations and gradually ascend to knowledge of the forms. Even followers of Aristotle, who viewed the physical world

with less suspicion, did not doubt that their *telos* or ‘function’ in a hierarchy of being established that some humans were slaves ‘by nature’.

Thus, reason or *logos* and a hierarchical ordering of things – everything ‘in its place’ – were virtually inseparable. From a modern vantage point, both rested on an assumption that looks irredeemably aristocratic. In the first century BC, however, this aristocratic model came under threat.

We have already encountered one threat. The relentless spread of Roman power, until the Mediterranean became a Roman basin, was accomplished even before the Roman Republic became an empire under Augustus. In terms of political life, Rome had become the centre and the rest of the Mediterranean world the periphery. Rome was like a giant theatre or stage, with the citizens of subjugated and dependent cities reduced to mere spectators sitting on its benches. They were ceasing to be actors on their own stages. Their inherited roles were jeopardized.

The undermining of local autonomy – of that civic life which provided the justification of citizenship and its privileges – had profound social and intellectual consequences. The ancient family had given birth to an aristocratic model of society, while polytheism had expressed the self-esteem of so many autonomous centres of political life. Just as the ancient citizen class was stricken by a mortal illness, because of centralization, so the familiar civic gods were fading into mere ghosts. In their place was a fierce, remote and often unfathomable power: Rome.

Where were people, not least the citizen classes, to turn in such an unfamiliar landscape? It is hardly surprising that a period of religious ferment coincided with these institutional changes. Mithras, Osiris and other exotic deities attracted followers. The growth of mystery cults, the search for personal ‘salvation’ and a new openness to foreign beliefs reflected the displacement of ancient citizenship. And this weakening of local identities afflicted inferiors as well as superiors, for it was not only the civic gods who began to lose their hold. So too did the whole structure of ancient rationalism, which – as we have seen – had been complicit in hierarchy, identifying reason as the attribute of a superior class.

Developments in Platonic philosophy provide an uncannily accurate picture of these wider developments. Instead of being content with the model of a rational ascent up the great chain of being by a few – that ascent which tied thought and being so closely together – philosophers began to worry about the source of all being. They began to worry about what was called the Absolute, a first cause that was beyond comprehension. This search for the power that lay behind everything turned philosophy in a more mystical direction. It began to reshape ethical thinking as well. For it led to moral rules being considered, not so much as rational conclusions derived from the nature of things, but as commands issuing from an agency that was ‘beyond’ reason.<sup>1</sup>

It was as if the trials of dealing with Roman power were being projected onto a universal screen. Was ‘will’ rather than ‘reason’ the key to things? If so, could a philosophical tradition that presented reason as the key both to nature and to right living provide an adequate conception of the will? Already, the attraction of mystery cults suggested that intensely personal acts of faith or dedication were gaining ground against the claims of a ‘rational’ order.

Such new questions gave, inadvertently, an enormous advantage to a religious tradition which, by the first century BC, had ceased to be a merely local tradition. An important Jewish diaspora was bringing radical monotheism to the attention of many Greek- and Latin-speaking urban dwellers around the Mediterranean. Synagogues became centres of interest in many cities. They attracted numerous followers, even while ritual requirements such as circumcision and diet preserved the tribal identity of Judaism. Eventually these followers acquired a name. They were ‘God-fearers’.

Just what was it that, rather suddenly, made Jewish beliefs so interesting? It was partly a matter of imagery. The image of a single, remote and inscrutable God dispensing his laws to a whole people corresponded to the experience of peoples who were being subjugated to the Roman *imperium*. But it was not just imagery. It was also a question of meaning, the meaning of law. For the Jews ‘law’ meant not logos or reason, but command. The law, properly so called, was Yahweh’s will.

The feeling of privileged control that had accompanied ancient

citizenship – the product of taking part in public discussion and decision-making in the polis – had infiltrated the ancient sense of rationality itself. It had led to the conclusion that reason could govern. Now both the feeling and the conclusion were compromised by the decline of the polis.

Conforming to an external will was becoming the dominant social experience. And the voice of Judaism spoke to that experience, as no other did. The message of the Jewish scriptures was radical. Virtue consisted in obedience to God's will. His will was not something that could be fathomed by reason. It could not be deduced from first principles. Nor could it be read in the book of nature. Scripture alone mattered, because it was the record of God's commands and promises. Historical events – the medium of God's will – were privileged over deductive reasoning. The Jewish God refused to be pinned down: 'I will be who I will be.'

A new sense of time thus went hand in hand with the new awareness of will. For both Greeks and Romans the dominant model for understanding change had been cyclical – the cycle of birth, growth and decay had seemed to fit only too well their experience of political constitutions being corrupted, of 'virtue' being undermined by 'luxury'. Only the efforts of heroic legislators could restore virtue, and that but temporarily, before the cycle reasserted itself. Permanence was provided by the cycle itself. And that predictability fitted well into the framework of ancient rationalist thinking.

The Jewish sense of time was different. It was unilinear rather than cyclical. Even the repeated lapses of Israel into idolatry did not dispel belief in God's overall control and direction of events. Had he not led his people to the 'promised land', and saved them repeatedly? The Jewish God expressed himself in time. Nothing would ever be the same as before. That was the nature of time. Is it fanciful to trace this sense back to the experiences of a nomadic people in the desert, aware that wind blowing across the sand transformed their landscape from one day to the next?

But there was something else. Although the law had always been understood as the inheritance of Yahweh's 'chosen' people, the law embodied his will for all of his people. And all were deemed to be capable of sinning against that law, even the most famous Jewish kings

such as David. Law therefore did not have the aristocratic connotations it had acquired through its identification, by Greeks and Romans, with the *logos* of a citizen class. Nor did Yahweh's will have the static quality conveyed by *logos* or reason. It was as if the imagery surviving from their nomadic past provided a different simile for the Jews' monotheism. God's will was like the wind shifting the desert sands. Nothing could resist it.

The concept of the will began to provide a new foundation for philosophical reflection by the first century AD. A gap opened up between the rationalism of earlier thought and this new voluntarism. Typical of the older view was Seneca's comment on the gods: 'They who believe the gods do not want to do harm are mistaken; the gods cannot.'<sup>2</sup> That is, the gods themselves are constrained by the rational structure of reality. They too must submit to a comprehensible natural order.

Later Platonists had, it is true, begun to compromise that rationalism in their account of the Absolute. They held that, because the first cause of being was beyond rational understanding, it could only be revealed in momentary illuminations to those whose rational discipline had led them away from sense experience to knowledge of the forms. But what such moments of illumination revealed was ineffable, beyond the resources of language to express. All that could be said about the Absolute was negative: that it was not limited, not necessitated, not the subject of knowledge. But if that was so, then the Absolute was not constrained by the supposed unity of thought and being, indeed by anything at all. The Absolute could act as it chose, whenever and however.<sup>3</sup>

The experience of submitting to a remote Roman ruler may well have contributed to such philosophical preoccupations among learned members of the citizen class. But for the urban populations of the Mediterranean at large that experience was more likely to result in a religious disposition than philosophical conviction. The set of roles provided by the city-state was disturbed. Withdrawing from accustomed roles into the self – a kind of inner exile – was often the result. The drama of the polis was losing its hypnotic hold. Instead of acting out parts written by their prescribed 'natures', people had little choice but to identify themselves in another way. An act of submission now

seemed to be the precondition of knowledge. So it began to appear that obedience led to understanding, rather than the reverse. It was a remarkable turnabout. For making obedience precede understanding, rather than follow from it, amounted to an intellectual revolution. It was a revolution that overturned the basis of the claim to superiority of the citizen class.

By the second century AD the new direction taken by argument made philosophers more self-aware. They no longer claimed that Moses and Plato had taught the same truth. Galen, writing about AD 170, contrasted Jewish belief in a creator whose unconstrained will brought everything into being, with Plato's and Aristotle's conception of a creator whose work is constrained by the dictates of reason – 'even a god is not able to change his nature.'<sup>4</sup>

If the God of the Old Testament was known through the dictates of his will, his reasons were beyond human comprehension. 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.' A new sympathy with these words of the prophet Isaiah was a sign that the ancient Mediterranean world was on the brink of a profound change. Postulating an act of will was becoming necessary to understand that world.

It might, indeed, look as if Jewish habits of thought were about to triumph completely over Graeco-Roman habits of thought, as if, in a battle between the idea of agency on the one hand, and that of rationality on the other, agency was about to drive rationality from the field. Did not the Jewish idea of 'law' correspond more closely to everyday experience – and help to cope with it – than 'reasons' founded on nature? Yet no such complete victory of Jewish thinking took place. And it did not take place at least in part because of the vision of a young Jew, Saul of Tarsus.

We have been looking at the impact of a religious tradition issuing from Palestine, a tradition that privileged time and will as against reason and nature. But Palestine itself had not been immune to outside influences. Ever since the Greek-dominated kingdoms established following Alexander's conquests, the Near East had been exposed to Greek influence in both obvious and less obvious ways. The Greek language had become virtually a lingua franca. Few among the Semitic

peoples had not encountered it and learned a smattering of Greek, while some, like Saul of Tarsus, had become wholly proficient in its use. Hellenized Jews were not uncommon. Greek culture had a very significant presence in all major cities, even in Jerusalem. Altogether, after three centuries of exposure the Near Eastern world was deeply Hellenized.

The spread of Roman power added to this intermingling of cultures. But it also created a new threat to Jewish nationhood and identity – an identity that had been defended stubbornly for centuries, in the face of repeated invasions and periods of exile. Little wonder that Judaism became increasingly volatile at this period, with the growth of Messianic movements, some of which looked forward to the advent of a national saviour, others of which renounced the world in anticipation of ‘the last days’.

One of these movements was the Jesus movement. Jesus of Nazareth seems to have begun as a disciple of one who later became known as John the Baptist. But Jesus came into his own and acquired followers, who accompanied him as he preached in the Galilean countryside. Just what did he preach? As far as we can tell, he preached repentance and the imminent end of the world. He spoke of God as his ‘father’ who loved all his children, not least the socially marginal. Those who truly repented of their sins could hope to enter the Kingdom of God. They should become like children, showing charity and trusting in God’s mercy.

Apparently there was no unanimity among his followers about the exact nature of Jesus’ mission. Some were probably still tempted to see him as the Messiah, in the sense of a leader who would lead Israel to victory over its enemies. Others understood the ‘kingdom’ in more mystical terms. Uncertainty about the nature of his claims, on the part of the Jewish and Roman authorities, may have contributed to his arrest, trial and crucifixion in Jerusalem. Shortly afterwards, the conviction that Jesus had survived death and that his work must go on gave this movement (‘the way’) new life in Jerusalem, where it was led by his brother James and disciple Simon Peter, the so-called ‘Jerusalem church’.

Beyond these sparse facts, little can be asserted with confidence about the historical Jesus of Nazareth. What we do know, however, is

that Jesus' followers very soon perceived his crucifixion as a moral earthquake. And the aftershocks of that earthquake continue into our own time. Followers of Jesus began to claim that his sacrificial life and death amounted to a dramatic intervention in history, a new revelation of God's will. Understanding that revelation would, in due course, provide crucial underpinning for what we understand as the nature and claims of the individual. It provided the individual with a foothold in reality.

First, Jesus crucified; then, Jesus resurrected. Previously in antiquity, it was the patriarchal family that had been the agency of immortality. Now, through the story of Jesus, individual moral agency was raised up as providing a unique window into the nature of things, into the experience of grace rather than necessity, a glimpse of something transcending death. The individual replaced the family as the focus of immortality.

The earliest surviving writings about Jesus are the work of Saul of Tarsus, who, of course, became St Paul. It is Paul who, translating the word 'Messiah' or 'anointed one' into Greek, began to speak eloquently and with determination to a non-Jewish world about Jesus as 'the Christ' – the Son of God who died for human sins and whose resurrection offers mankind the hope of eternal life. 'The Christ' thus was not a proper name but a title and an idea. It originally referred to an anointed one who would deliver Israel from its enemies, but Paul gave the term a new meaning and spoke of the Christ offering salvation to all humanity. 'The Christ' stood for the presence of God in the world.

It is hardly too much to say that Paul invented Christianity as a religion. Paul felt that through Jesus he had discovered something crucial – the supreme moral fact about humans – which provided the basis for reconstructing human identity, opening the way to what he called 'a new creation'. 'Even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!'<sup>5</sup> For Paul, it was through the Christ that God was reconciling the world – individual souls – to himself, 'not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us'. Spreading that message of love became Paul's great missionary enterprise.

So we must now do our best to enter into Paul's mind.

Paul, who as Saul of Tarsus had persecuted members of the Jesus movement, had a famous conversion experience when travelling from Jerusalem to Damascus. He was thrown from his horse, according to a New Testament account, by the power of a vision of Jesus. But whether his conversion was quite so instantaneous and complete is open to doubt. It is more likely that he spent some years pondering the significance of Jesus of Nazareth, finding the terms in which to express his new convictions. Paul's vision gradually became a conception, his remarkable conception of the Christ.

In Paul's eyes, the Christ reveals God acting through human agency and redeeming it. The Christ reveals a God who is potentially present in every believer.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor anything in all creation . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>6</sup>

Through an act of faith in the Christ, human agency can become the medium for God's love – what Paul sometimes calls 'faith acting through love'. The faith accepting that love amounted to an inner crucifixion, from which could emerge a transformed will, embodied in the person of Jesus. For Paul, it was a personal transaction, the creation of another, better self. 'I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'<sup>7</sup>

In effect, Paul's vision of a mystical union with Christ introduces a revised notion of rationality – what he sometimes describes as the 'foolishness' of God. It is a foundation for a rationality reshaped through faith. It constitutes a depth of motivation unknown to ancient philosophy. 'No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus the Christ.'<sup>8</sup> For the sacrificial nature of love is open to everyone. And it counts everyone as a child of God. 'Let it be known to you, therefore, my brothers, that through

this man forgiveness of sin is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free . . . ? Paul's message is directed not merely to Jews but to all humanity. It is an invitation to seek a deeper self, an inner union with God. It offers to give reason itself a new depth. Rationality loses its aristocratic connotations. It is associated not with status and pride but with a humility which liberates.

Paul's conception of the Christ overturns the assumption on which ancient thinking had hitherto rested, the assumption of natural inequality. Instead, Paul wagers on human equality. It is a wager that turns on transparency, that we can and should see ourselves in others, and others in ourselves. A leap of faith in human equality reveals – beneath the historical accumulation of unequal social statuses and roles – the universal availability of a God-given foundation for human action, the free action of love. That action is what Paul's vision of the Christ revealed. As deployed by Paul, the concept of the Christ becomes a challenge to the ancient belief that humans are subject to an immutable order or 'fate'.

Paul's vision on the road to Damascus amounted to the discovery of human freedom – of a moral agency potentially available to each and everyone, that is, to individuals. This 'universal' freedom, with its moral implications, was utterly different from the freedom enjoyed by the privileged class of citizens in the polis.

In his conception of the Christ, Paul brings together basic features of Jewish and Greek thought to create something new. We can see this in a famous passage from his letters, the letter to the Galatians, dating from about twenty years after Jesus' crucifixion. Paul uses Jesus' emphasis on the fatherhood of God to insist on the brotherhood of man and, indirectly, to proclaim his own role as apostle to the Gentiles. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'<sup>9</sup> Paul's 'one' signals a new transparency in human relations. Through his conception of the Christ, Paul insists on the moral equality of humans, on a status shared equally by all. And his great mission becomes the salvation of individual souls, through sharing his vision of the Christ – a vision which makes it possible to create a new self.

The argument that all humans can become 'one in Christ' – and that through him all may share in the righteousness of God – reveals

Paul grafting a new abstractness onto Jewish thought. It is an abstractness that would foster Christian understanding of community as the free association of the wills of morally equal agents, what Paul describes through metaphor as the 'body of Christ'. The metaphor conjures up a mystical union which moralizes individual wills by relating them to the source of their being. This mixture of elements which became Christianity was profoundly indebted to developments in Greek thought. For the discourse of citizenship in the polis had initiated a distancing of persons from mere family and tribal identities, while later Hellenistic philosophy had introduced an even more wide-ranging, speculative 'universalist' idiom. That intellectual breadth had, in turn, been reinforced by the subjection of so much of the Mediterranean world to a single power, Rome.

What Paul did, in effect, was to combine the abstracting potential of later Hellenistic philosophy – its speculations about a universal or 'human' nature – with Judaism's preoccupation with conformity to a higher or divine will. In order to do so, Paul ceases to think of that will as an external, coercive agency. For him, the death of Christ provides the symbol and the means of an inner crucifixion, of leaving behind the life of 'the flesh' for the life of 'the spirit', that is, leaving behind inclinations and desires that will die with the flesh. 'Dying in Christ' means acquiring a will properly so called. It is a liberation or, as Paul often calls it, the beginning of a 'new creation'. And the act of faith required is an individual act, an internal event.

Paul overturns the assumption of natural inequality by creating an inner link between the divine will and human agency. He conceives the idea that the two can, at least potentially, be fused within each person, thereby justifying the assumption of the moral equality of humans. That fusion is what the Christ offers to mankind. It is what Paul means when he speaks of humans becoming 'one in Christ'. That fusion marks the birth of a 'truly' individual will, through the creation of conscience.

When human action had been understood as governed entirely by social categories, by established statuses and roles, there was no need for another foundation for shaping intentions. But introducing the assumption of moral equality changes that. It obliges Paul to look deeper into the human agent. Suddenly there is a need to find a standard to govern

individual action and a force within each person to act. In his conception of the Christ, Paul claims to have found that standard and that force. Now, the identity of individuals is no longer exhausted by the social roles they happen to occupy. A gap opens up between individuals and the roles they occupy. That gap marks the advent of the new freedom, freedom of conscience. But it also introduces moral obligations that follow from recognizing that all humans are children of God.

For Paul, belief in the Christ makes possible the emergence of a primary role shared equally by all ('the equality of souls'), while conventional social roles – whether of father, daughter, official, priest or slave – become secondary in relation to that primary role. To this primary role an indefinite number of social roles may or may not be added as the attributes of a subject, but they no longer define the subject. That is the freedom which Paul's conception of the Christ introduces into human identity.

Yet the individual freedom implied by the assertion of this primary role did not mean that Paul dissolved traditional social bonds without replacing them. His was not an 'atomized' model of society. Far from it. Rather, Paul creates a new basis for human association, a voluntary basis – joining humans through loving wills guided by an equal belief. In his eyes, the motivating power of love is the touch of divinity within each of us.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing . . . Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude . . . It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things . . . Love never ends.<sup>10</sup>

Love creates what Paul calls a mystical union in the 'body of Christ'. The metaphor conveys what, in his eyes, is distinctive about Christian association. An unseen bond of wills joined by conscience identifies this mystical body, distinguishing it from associations founded on

birth, gender or social status. Human agency acquires a new independence and dignity.

Paul thus attaches to the historical figure of Jesus a crucial moment in the development of human self-consciousness. Before Paul, speculation about a 'human' nature had not carried a strong moral message. By contrast, Paul's Christ carries a revolutionary moral message. For Paul, the Christ is a God-given challenge to humans to transform their conception of themselves and reach for moral universality. Through faith, they can achieve a moral rebirth. They can move beyond the Jewish law or mere rule-following. Baptism became the symbol of receiving that 'Holy Spirit', which meant that believers were henceforth 'in Christ' and free. Paul relies on the imagery of casting off the shackles of slavery, a potent image in a world where slavery remained such a basic institution. His message is one of universal hope.

In his preaching, as he moved from city to city along the Anatolian coast and into Greece, Paul insisted that his God was a God who is 'with us'. The age of the 'spirit' has succeeded the age of the 'flesh'. The resurrection of Jesus (with a spiritual body rather than a body of 'flesh and blood') heralds the beginning of that new age – which is not to say that 'the saints' would not falter or often relapse into old ways. In fact, Paul spent much of his time corresponding with churches he had founded, fighting against habits of thought which, in his view, recreated forms of bondage, neglecting charity in favour of rules and attributing to 'principalities and powers' a reality they did not possess.

Despite constant setbacks and eventual martyrdom, Paul may be said to have prevailed. For his understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection introduced to the world a new picture of reality. It provided an ontological foundation for 'the individual', through the promise that humans have access to the deepest reality as individuals rather than merely as members of a group. Here we see the power of abstraction, which had previously led Hellenic philosophers to speculate about a human nature prior to social conventions, being turned to a new moral use. The self can and must be reconstructed. That conviction enabled Paul to conclude that Christian liberty supersedes the Jewish law. It provided the justification for his mission to convert the Gentile world to the God of Israel revealed in the Christ.

The wish of some Jewish Christians to make conversion to Judaism

a prerequisite for becoming Christian – requiring circumcision for males, for example – aroused Paul’s fury and contempt, not least because it jeopardized his conception of his own mission. For Paul, Christian liberty is open to all humans. Free action, a gift of grace through faith in the Christ, is utterly different from ritual behaviour, the unthinking application of rules. For Paul, to think otherwise is to regress rather than progress in the spirit. That is how Paul turns the abstracting potential of Greek philosophy to new uses. He endows it with an almost ferocious moral universalism. The Greek mind and the Jewish will are joined.

Individual rationality, rationality in all equally, is purchased at the price of submitting to God’s will as revealed in the Christ. For Paul, when rationality and the will are presented as alternatives, they are false alternatives. In the Christ, both the power of God and the wisdom of God are revealed. Jesus is the Christ because his death and resurrection give humans, as individuals, access to the mind and the will of God. God ceases to be tribal. ‘The law was our guardian until Christ came, so that we might be made righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Jesus Christ you are all sons of God, through faith.’<sup>11</sup>

Often, it is true, ‘I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate’.<sup>12</sup> Yet through the gift of faith, human actions can cease to be bound by mere habit. For Paul, only in the Christ are wisdom and power joined. Only through faith are the human capacity to act and the faculty of reason reconciled. ‘For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.’<sup>13</sup>

So what has Paul achieved by arguing in this way? What does abandonment to the love of God as ‘revealed’ in the Christ entail? We cannot know everything this meant to Paul. But we can identify at least part of what it meant to him, disengaging moral principles from his apocalyptic vision of a universe transformed. In order to do that, we must look closely at one premise of Paul’s argument. The premise of moral equality requires a human will that is in a sense pre-social. It is that will which Paul’s great discovery, his mystical vision of the Christ, provides. The Christ provides a foundation in the nature of

things for a pre-social or individual will. Individual agency acquires roots in divine agency. The Christ stands for the presence of God in the world, the ultimate support for individual identity.

Delving below all social divisions of labour, Paul finds, beneath the conventional terms that confer status and describe roles, a shared reality. That reality is the human capacity to think and choose, to will. That reality is our potential for understanding ourselves as autonomous agents, as truly the children of God.

But if thought depends upon language, and language is a social institution, how can rational agency have a pre-social foundation? That is the dilemma Paul's argument comes up against. For Paul, the gift of love in the Christ offers a pre-linguistic solution, through a leap of faith – that is, a wager on the moral equality of humans. Faith in the Christ requires seeing oneself in others and others in oneself, the point of view which truly moralizes humans as agents. So Paul's solution – a paradoxical one, to say the least – is that human autonomy can only be fully realized through submission, through submitting to the mind and will of God as revealed in the Christ. That act of submission is the beginning of 'a new creation'.

Was Paul wrong? His expectation of the imminent return of the Christ was disappointed. And the postponement of the 'last days' led to considerable embarrassment for 'the saints' in the churches he established during his journeys. By the end of the first century what became the Christian church was abandoning its emphasis on the imminent end of the world. Yet Paul's vision of a world transformed may have been more misleading in form than in content. For, in fact, his conception of the Christ laid the foundation for a new type of society: 'The present form of the world is passing away.'<sup>14</sup> While that insistence by Paul in a letter to the Corinthian church is open to more than one interpretation, Paul himself seemed to believe that the new creation was already under way.

What did submission to the Christ involve? In religious terms, it called for human relationships in which charity overcomes all other motives. But, even when separated from an apocalyptic vision of human community (the 'body of Christ'), the promotion of 'Christian liberty' involves submitting to the premises of moral equality and reciprocity. 'You were called to freedom . . . Only do not use your freedom

as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word . . . Love your neighbour as yourself.<sup>15</sup> Those premises promised to create a transparency and freedom previously lacking in human relations.

So in Paul's writings we see the emergence of a new sense of justice, founded on the assumption of moral equality rather than on natural inequality. Justice now speaks to an upright will, rather than describing a situation where everything is in its 'proper' or fated place. Paul's conception of the Christ exalts the freedom and power of human agency, when rightly directed. In his vision of Jesus, Paul discovered a moral reality which enabled him to lay the foundation for a new, universal social role.

## 5

# The Truth Within: Moral Equality

The imagery that dominated Paul's teaching was an imagery of depth – of going 'beneath' and finding 'the depths of God'. Despite Paul's conflicts with leaders of the Jerusalem church over the Jewish law, the extent of its obligations for Gentile followers, his emphasis on innerness and freedom spread through churches developing around the Mediterranean. These churches, which at first were really Christian synagogues, increasingly conveyed a Pauline message, proclaiming that, through the gift of grace in the Christ, 'the Kingdom of God is within you'.

Fierce Jewish opposition to the Jesus movement helped to give it a more distinct identity. Moreover, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70 reinforced the role of Gentile converts and Paul's influence. In the following decades what was beginning to be called the 'Christian church' ceased to be primarily a Jewish sect, as it had been when dominated by Jesus' brother James.

The development of that 'church' at the end of the first century and early in the second century remains largely a matter of surmise. There was as yet no fixed canon of Christian gospels, nor any agreement about the relationship between Christian writings and Jewish scriptures. Indeed, disagreements about some matters soon became so important that they became the means of beginning to define Christian 'orthodoxy' later in the second and in the third century. It is by looking at those disagreements that we can get a sense of the nature of a movement now so widespread that it was coming to the attention of the Roman authorities.

As apocalyptic expectations weakened, the need for Christians to explain themselves grew. From the middle of the second century Justin

Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons wrote the first significant apologetics. Echoing Paul, Irenaeus argued that ‘it is not sacrifices that sanctify a man; for God has no need of sacrifices’, rather, ‘it is the purity of the offerer’s disposition that sanctifies the sacrifice.’<sup>1</sup> The quality of the individual will or disposition was becoming the Christian leitmotiv. Paul’s imagery of depth had fostered the sense of a realm of conscience that demanded respect. Individual agency and divine agency were now understood as parts of a continuum.

Slowly that sense or intuition was formalized. The church which presided over major developments in thinking systematically about the core of Christian beliefs was the church of Alexandria. The church of that sophisticated city came to count among its membership intellectuals formed by the schools of Greek philosophy, particularly later Platonism. Their attempts to adapt the categories of Greek philosophy to their new belief in a God who had revealed himself in Jesus – in Paul’s ‘the Christ’ – led to arguments over imagery, over the role of human agency or freedom and over the claims of reason. These arguments became the first important steps in developing the notion of humans as morally equal agents, as individuals properly so called. The arguments also reveal how Christian beliefs caused trouble for minds shaped by the rationalism of the ancient world. For that rationalism was impregnated with assumptions about natural inequality, hierarchy and fate.

The argument over imagery was more implicit than explicit. It was a struggle between the imagery of descent and the imagery of ascent. Paul’s conception of God ‘with us’ had privileged the imagery of descent. The incarnation was a matter of knowledge, but it was knowledge of an inner event and reality – as Clement of Alexandria, writing late in the second century, emphasized by quoting from Paul on ‘that knowledge of God in Christ in whom all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom are hidden’. Clement was aware that the new emphasis on descent made a contrast with the traditional Platonic imagery of a rational ascent, of climbing a mountain that led away from unreliable sense experience to certain knowledge, for at least a few. So Clement quotes from the Gospel of John in order to present the Christian God as the ground or foundation of individual being:

John the apostle writes: ‘No one has seen God at any time; the only-begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.’ (John 1.18) He (John) uses the name ‘bosom’ of God to refer to his invisibility and ineffability; for this reason some people have used the name ‘depth’ to indicate that he is inaccessible and incomprehensible, but embraces and enfolds all things.<sup>2</sup>

Knowledge of the depths revealed by the Christ – the discovery of a will that redeems – raised, in turn, the question of human freedom. For if faith in the Christ can free humans from the bondage of sin, then each must have a potential for freedom, a free will.

Yet old habits of thinking were not overcome easily. The reality of time, will and sin – imports from the Jewish tradition – had now to be joined to a Greek framework which prized knowledge, orderliness and control. We can observe such joining in the arguments of Origen, a pupil of Clement who wrote early in the third century. Origen reflects on the nature of religious language, in order to show that God’s dealings with man can only be described in human terms, with all their limitations. Thus, to say that God is ‘angry’ or that he ‘repents’ should not be taken literally. These terms are rather like the language adopted by a loving father when dealing with his children.

So it is with human freedom and God’s ‘foreknowledge’ of the outcome. The two are not inconsistent, Origen insists:

In the passage, ‘Speak to the children of Israel; perhaps they will hear and will repent’ (Jer 26 2.3), God does not say ‘perhaps they will hear’, as if he were in doubt about it. God is never in doubt and that cannot be the reason . . . The reason is to make your freedom of choice stand out as clearly as possible and to prevent your saying: ‘If he foreknows my loss then I am bound to be lost and if he foreknows my salvation then I am quite certain to be saved.’ Thus he acts as if he did not know the future in your case, in order to preserve your freedom of choice by not anticipating or foreknowing whether you will repent or not. So he says to the prophet: ‘Speak; perhaps they will repent’.<sup>3</sup>

Divine government of the world or providence does not exclude human freedom. On the contrary, when properly understood, individual

choice, action and the consequences of action are evidence of providential government, which is not the same as fate.

For Origen, God had created ‘rational creatures endowed with the faculty of free choice’, who were led ‘each one by his own free will, either to imitate God and so to advance or to ignore him and so to fall’. The variety of the human world reflects a freedom that is the crux of human agency. Thus the ‘diversity between rational creatures’ had its origin ‘not in the will or judgement of the creator, but in the choice made by the creature’s own freedom’.<sup>4</sup>

In these attempts to join Jewish and Greek categories of thought, there is a quite new emphasis on demonstrable fact as against metaphysical speculation. There is a new prejudice against multiplying entities or essences, a reluctance to populate the world with beings intermediate between God and man. Early Christians saw themselves as involved in a war against ‘demons’, even suggesting that the demons existed only so long as people believed in them. Here we can perhaps see Paul’s inveighing against belief in ‘dark’ powers or rudiments taking hold, although references to ‘angels and demons’ long survived in Christian discourse. But, at bottom, the new structure of ideas was hostile to them.

It is no accident that early Christian apologists emphasized the simplicity of their faith – the way it focused on human intentions or the will, rather than on spurious beings that give an inflated impression of what humans might control or influence. ‘I am fully convinced that the solemn ceremonies and secret rites of idolatry build up credence and prestige for themselves by means of their pretentious magnificence – and by the fees that are charged,’ Tertullian, a formidable Carthaginian convert, insisted early in the third century. ‘For God, being the creator of the whole Universe, is in no need of smells or of blood. That is the fodder of petty demons. We do not merely despise these demons; we subdue them; we put them to daily disgrace; we drive them out of people, as multitudes can testify.’<sup>5</sup> These apologists were implacable opponents of black magic. In a sense they were redefining the sphere of human action, laying the foundation for what eventually became a clearer distinction between ‘internal’ reasons for acting and the physical causes of external events.

Critics of Christianity like Celsus late in the second century were

disturbed by such attitudes. Celsus argued that Christianity separated man too sharply from the rest of nature and demeaned nature by reducing it to a mere instrument for human purposes. ‘They say that God made all things for man,’ he complained. ‘He forsakes the whole universe and the course of the heavenly spheres to dwell with us alone.’<sup>6</sup> Celsus had a serious point. But he failed to see the importance of clarifying the sphere of human freedom for identifying individual moral responsibility. For Christian converts, receiving the ‘holy spirit’ in baptism stood for liberation from the confusions of paganism as well as the literalism of Judaism. Being ‘in Christ’ meant receiving that spirit. It directed attention where it ought to be directed: to real moral choices and works of charity. It made sacrifices in the temples of local deities and male circumcision unnecessary.

‘What wretched unbelief to deny to God his distinctive attributes – simplicity and power!’ Tertullian once exclaimed.<sup>7</sup> In a way, his attitude anticipates a principle laid down by an Oxford philosopher in the late middle ages. ‘Ockham’s Razor’ insists that explanations should always be made in the simplest terms possible, avoiding the multiplication of entities. Human desires and intentions should not be confused with natural processes. It may not be far-fetched to suggest that Ockham’s principle had its roots in early Christian reassessment of the role of human agency, roots which nourished a sense of the difference between nature and culture, of the limits of human reason.

For there is no doubt that early Christian apologists associated the polytheism of paganism with misuse of the mind and the will. In deifying natural forces and creating local gods, paganism drew attention away from crucial questions about the individual will and man’s God-given responsibility. Even Judaism had fallen into the trap of largely identifying the will with external conformity to the law, which had led Paul, in reaction, to look ‘inward’, to motivation. This Christian awareness of the ‘love of God’ as the source of upright action was intensely practical. Something of this can be glimpsed in the fourth century in St Basil’s apology for Christianity against those who, defending once again the assumptions of ancient rationalism, condemned Christians for worshipping ‘what they do not know’. In reply, Basil turned the distinctions of Greek philosophy against its latest defenders:

They should not be asking us whether we know God's essence; they should be enquiring whether we know God as awe-inspiring, as just, or as merciful. And these are the things that we confess that we do know. If on the other hand they say that God's essence is different from these attributes, they must not produce spurious arguments against us on the basis of the simplicity of that essence. For in that case they have themselves admitted that his essence is something different from every one of his attributes. His activities are various but his essence is simple. Our position is that it is from his activities that we come to know our God, while we do not claim to come anywhere near his actual essence. For his activities reach us, but his essence remains inaccessible.<sup>8</sup>

What emerges from these early texts is a chastened conception of the role of reason – what might be described as a more democratic, less aristocratic conception of reason. Deductive reason can aid in the discovery of truth, but it cannot lay down the truth out of its own resources. Reason cannot and indeed should not try to coerce reality. Christian humility was presented as a precaution against that error. The 'foolishness' of God's revelation in the Christ was a permanent warning.

What adds to the interest of these texts – and what became important for Christian 'orthodoxy' – is that they responded to the arguments, not just of pagans or Jews, but of other Christians who found it hard to give up the framework of ancient rationalism. As late as the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Fathers of the Church, speaks with an unreconstructed Platonic voice, when describing Moses receiving the law on Mount Sinai. 'When the herd of irrational animals is driven as far as possible from the mountain, he [Moses] approaches the ascent to higher thoughts,' Gregory comments. 'The fact that no animal is permitted to appear on the mountain indicates, in our judgement, that in the vision of intelligible reality, one is passing beyond knowledge derived from sense experience.'<sup>9</sup>

Gregory does not hesitate to draw conclusions about the proper ordering of the Christian Church:

The multitude could not hear the voice from above but left it to Moses to learn for himself the hidden secrets and to teach the people whatever divine truths he might acquire from the teaching coming from above. The same is true of the ordering of the Church. It is not for everyone to

push themselves forward to try to comprehend the mysteries. They should select one of their number who is able to grasp divine truth; then they should give careful attention to him . . .<sup>10</sup>

The aristocratic bias of his Platonism is clear enough. For Gregory, reality continues to be essentially intelligible, but only for a few. His imagery remains that of Platonic ascent. In his view, most people are incapable of reaching further than the foot of what is truly a mountain – ‘for such indeed is the knowledge of God’.

Ancient rationalism was not defeated rapidly. In fact, in the second century it had already mounted a powerful rearguard action, an action associated with the movement known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism was in part a reaction against Jewish influences. The Gnostics fell back on the Platonic assumption that knowledge was the condition of enlightenment and that a hierarchy of being stigmatized ‘base matter’. They too relied on the imagery of ascent, an ascent possible for the elect. Self-liberation required renunciation of the material world and its ‘darkness’, in order to return upwards to the world of ‘light’. For Christian Gnostics, the Christ provided knowledge of that world of light. Yet those capable of achieving that knowledge strongly resembled Plato’s guardians. In effect, the Gnostics moved away from Paul’s assumption that liberation through faith was the condition of knowledge and salvation. The ‘foolishness’ of God was not altogether to their taste.

Christian Gnostics did not hesitate to multiply essences and entities: in one Gnostic text no fewer than thirty ‘highest’ levels of being or light were enumerated! These highest levels of being were pure thought, flowing from the transcendent God. They were uncontaminated by matter or ‘darkness’. However, this descending order of pure being reached a point of impurity, when the lowest of these beings – Sophia or wisdom – succumbed to sexual desire and gave birth to a material world ruled by Yahweh, an inferior god. When Adam, in turn, was created, he retained a vestige of the world of light or pure being, but through his body was joined to the material world and its temptations, the world of Yahweh. Only the advent of Christ, the very figure of light, revealed again the true nature of God and made salvation possible for the elect.<sup>11</sup>

These Gnostic ideas reveal the problems that marrying Christian convictions with Platonic metaphysics introduced. They introduced a disdain for the material world foreign to Judaism, a flirtation with the assumption of natural inequality that Paul had overturned, and a doubt about whether Yahweh and the Christian God were one and the same. Indeed, the radical dualism of the Gnostics threatened the very conception of the incarnation – for it made problematic the intimate union of God and man in the Christ. For the Gnostics, spirit and matter could not be combined.

If the Gnostics represent – in relation to ancient rationalism – a conservative or even reactionary wing of the Christian movement, there was another wing. And that wing reveals the socially subversive potential of Christian beliefs, a potential that would take many centuries to emerge fully. Still, we can get an impression of its potential by looking at a text and at a man. The man is Marcion, the most controversial figure to emerge in Christian thought since Paul. Born towards the end of the first century, Marcion was the son of a presbyter-bishop on the Black Sea coast, and became a wealthy merchant and ship-owner. But he was also a frustrated intellectual, with a passion for finding out and defining what was new and distinctive about Christian beliefs. That passion finally led him to Rome and into what the ‘orthodox’ began to call ‘heresy’.

In Marcion’s eyes, Paul’s letters and the Gospel according to Luke provided all that was necessary. He presented a radical and simplified version of Paul’s teaching. Free from Paul’s anxiety about dealing with the Jerusalem Church, Marcion issued a kind of declaration of independence. The loving God revealed by the Christ was not the jealous God of the Old Testament, who was a primitive, tribal being. The revelation of Christ needed no support from the Jewish scriptures. It was a new revelation, sufficient unto itself, the means of salvation for those who trusted in God’s goodness. Marcion wanted to purge the Christian gospel – indeed, he was perhaps the first to try to assemble ‘the’ gospels – of irrelevant Jewish elements.<sup>12</sup>

Marcion fastened onto the universal dimension of Paul’s conception of the Christ, emphasizing the abstract individualism latent in the conception rather than presenting it – as Paul had done – as a new covenant with the God of Israel. Evidently Marcion was influenced by

Gnostic ideas. But he avoided the dualism which turned the Christ into a purely spiritual being with only the appearance of a human form. What he did not avoid, on the other hand, was the temptation to understand salvation as the return of disciplined souls to God. Marcion neglected those features of Paul's thought that depicted Christian churches as 'loving' associations founded on belief in human equality, a new type of community.

The fate of the individual soul rather than a community of 'the saints' became the focus of Marcionism. Apparently the churches Marcion established were rather hieratic, perhaps a hangover from Gnosticism. Nonetheless, his churches were also criticized for giving women an important role. If Marcion was a heretic, it was probably because he developed the individualism latent in Paul's thought to the point where he would one day be considered a proto-Protestant.

The other source which gives a glimpse of the potential for Christian radicalism is a text discovered about fifty years ago in the Egyptian desert, the Gospel of Thomas. There is doubt about its exact date, though most scholars believe that in its present form it dates from the mid-second century. Certainly it reveals Gnostic influences. But it probably also incorporates an important early Aramaic tradition of Jesus' sayings, a survival of what scholars suppose may have been many 'sayings gospels'. In any case, the Gospel of Thomas contains extraordinary passages devoted to what can only be described as women's 'liberation'.

We have seen that the conventional view in antiquity was that women could not be fully rational beings. Their subordination, like that of slaves, was justified in that way. The Gospel of Thomas urges a new project on believers: nothing less than turning women into men! They are to become as 'one'. By that it is clearly meant that women should be enabled to become rational agents, to recognize that they have the same rational and moral capacities as men. 'When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner . . . and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, then you will enter (the kingdom).'<sup>13</sup> That reconstruction of the self, which Paul had urged on his followers, is here tied overtly to a change in the status of women. The implication of the

text is that only when women are free can men also be truly free – that the reciprocity which belief in human equality entails is only possible when their shared nature is fully acknowledged.

In the Gospel of Thomas the proper use of the mind leads to moral transparency. It continues the work of liberation from hierarchical agencies that Paul had urged. As reported by Thomas, Jesus' words overturn the subordination of women, one of the pillars on which the ancient family – and with it a whole conception of society – had rested. His words are consistent with passages in the canonical gospels in which Jesus asks that his followers be prepared to throw over even the ties of family, rejecting parents and siblings when the service of God so requires.

Such injunctions privileged individual agency over corporate agency, conscience over inherited social roles. They may also throw light on the roots of Pauline individualism in Jesus' sayings. Certainly they make it easier to understand Paul's conviction that faith, which reveals the foundation of human agency, liberates. In the Gospel of Thomas we can see the moral intuitions generated by Christian beliefs being given a new application. Belief in the moral equality of humans was beginning to threaten fundamental status differences.

Of course, the Gospel of Thomas was a minority report. But it reveals that the moral intuitions generated by Christianity were hard to contain, even when the organized church was anxious to placate Roman authorities and deny that it had any conspiratorial or subversive character. Paul had already firmly asserted that the 'powers that be are authorized by God'. By and large, the early Fathers of the Church agreed. To combat Celsus' argument that Christians' loyalties made them bad citizens, Origen argued that Christian morality offered a better foundation for public power: 'The more pious a man is, the more effective he is in helping the emperors – more so than the soldiers who go out into the line and kill all the enemy troops that they can.'<sup>14</sup>

This was a fateful argument. For what does it suggest? Origen was meeting Celsus' complaint that the Christians' unwillingness to sacrifice to the civic gods, accept public office and take up arms when asked was compromising the safety of the Roman empire and undermining the piety that sustained it. In reply, Origen argued, at least by implication, for a wholly different conception of society. He argued

for a society that recognized moral limits to the claims of public power, invoking a sphere of individual responsibility that transcended the traditional duties of citizenship: ‘We know of the existence in each city of another sort of country, created by the Word of God.’<sup>15</sup> Origen’s implication was that a society founded on Christian morality offered, in the long run, a better prospect of stability and survival. ‘We who by our prayers destroy all demons which stir up wars, violate oaths and disturb the peace, are of more help to the emperors than those who seem to be doing the fighting.’<sup>16</sup>

Thus, even before Augustine’s ‘city of God’, Christian apologists were invoking ‘the country of God’ to assert the claims of the individual conscience. Such claims of conscience seemed to follow irresistibly from the assumption of moral equality. Equality, choice and responsibility hung together in their minds. Irenaeus repeatedly insisted on this as early as the mid-second century: ‘God’s just judgement falls equally on all men, and never fails.’

If God has created humans as equals, as rational agents with free will, then there ought to be an area within which they are free to choose and responsible for their choices. Identifying such an area was at first a means of self-defence by Christians. But soon it was also more than that. Tertullian saw clearly the implications of Christian moral beliefs. ‘Here lies the perfection and distinctiveness of Christian goodness,’ he argued. ‘Ordinary goodness is different; for all men love their friends, but only Christians love their enemies.’<sup>17</sup> Respecting a range of freedom of choice in all humans might be seen as one aspect of the latter.

The suggestion that belief in ‘equal liberty’ appeared in early Christian apologetics will surprise many and irritate some. For the anti-clericalism which has been an integral part of liberal historiography does not lend itself to such a conclusion. Besides, the distrust of anything like teleological explanations in history – of what is often called the Whig interpretation of history – reinforces such scepticism. But texts are facts. And the facts remain. In the mid-second century Irenaeus of Lyon asked, ‘what new thing did the Word bring by coming down to earth?’ For Tertullian, writing only a few decades later, the answer was clear. ‘One mighty deed alone was sufficient for our God – to bring freedom to the human person.’<sup>18</sup>

Tertullian was perhaps the most remarkable of the Church Fathers before Augustine. And he was in no doubt about the claims of conscience.

We worship the one God . . . There are others whom you regard as gods; we know them to be demons. Nevertheless, it is a basic human right that everyone should be free to worship according to his own convictions. No one is either harmed or helped by another man's religion. Religion must be practised freely, not by coercion; even animals for sacrifice must be offered with a willing heart. So even if you compel us to sacrifice, you will not be providing your gods with any worthwhile service. They will not want sacrifices from unwilling offerers – unless they are perverse, which God is not.<sup>19</sup>

Here we may find one of the earliest assertions of a basic right, a rightful power claimed for humans as such, that is, as individuals. Did Tertullian's argument also imply that authority, founded on consent, was different from mere physical power, the ability to constrain? Probably. That seems to lurk behind the suggestion by many early apologists that Christians might, after all, be the 'better citizens', despite their unwillingness to sacrifice to civic gods or the emperor. For they gave social order a foundation in consciences. In any case, Tertullian's determination to defend the claims of conscience – a sphere of personal choice – is unmistakeable.

But would such a determination survive after the Christian Church was recognized by the Emperor Constantine in 313 and, in due course, became the official religion of the Roman empire?