a century and a half before the barbarian invaders built their kingdoms upon its ruins. In the East the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire, whose foundations were laid when Constantine created Constantinople, played a major role in history for another thousand years. In both East and West, Roman civilization was the matrix for those institutional and cultural forms which we call mediaeval.
CHAPTER III

The Ordeal and Triumph of Christianity

THE conversion of the emperor Constantine the Great to Christianity marked the beginning of a new epoch. A religion which had been derided and persecuted now won its way to victory over the other religions in the Empire, the older Graeco-Roman gods as well as the new cults brought in from the East. In the twilight hours of the Empire the pagan gods went down to defeat, and the triumph of Christianity heralded the birth of the Middle Ages.

What were the factors within Christianity which fostered its victory? What were the external circumstances which facilitated its spread from a tiny and insignificant part of the Roman Empire over the length and breadth of that immense Roman world? Why was the imperial government, normally tolerant in matters of religion, hostile to Christianity? Although it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer categorically questions which concern men's spiritual attachments and aspirations, an examination of religious developments during the first three or four centuries of the Empire may at least suggest some possible explanations of both the ordeal and the triumph of Christianity. Without
such an inquiry neither the later Roman Empire nor the early Middle Ages can be understood.

Decline of Stoicism

We have seen how in the face of overwhelming material difficulties the Romans sought comfort in religion or consolation in philosophy. In Stoicism or in the more recent Neoplatonism a handful of intellectuals found a formula which resolved their problems. But philosophy failed to answer the psychological needs of the mass of the people, even if, like Neoplatonism, it adopted some of the panoply of religion. It offered few rays of hope regarding either the grim present or the uncertain future, and it provided no colorful ceremony to compensate for the drabness of life. If it addressed itself to the intellect, the message of philosophy was too coldly logical and austerely rational to satisfy even the changing interests of intellectuals, let alone the unlettered majority. Philosophy could only flourish by making an alliance with religion, by admitting some divine and supernatural power into its system. The Graeco-Roman spirit of rationalism was being buffeted and broken by waves of religious enthusiasm. Of all the many changes occurring in the Roman Empire, this change from a scientific, objective, and rational basis of thought and life to a way of life based upon faith and dogma is perhaps the most revolutionary.

The emphasis shifted from this world to a world to come, from an attempt by man to solve his own problems to a reliance upon a higher power. Simultaneously with the disintegration of the Empire, both cause and result of that collapse, the ancient tradition of science and rationalism crumbled.

The fate of Stoic philosophy in the Later Empire is in-
structive. Here was a philosophy which was fundamentally monotheistic, teaching that there is in the universe an immortal all-pervasive world-soul of whose divinity each man possesses a spark. From this was deduced the universal brotherhood of mankind long before Christianity reached the same conclusions. In this sense it can be said that Stoicism drew a blueprint of the universal empire Rome was to form. Its code of ethics was of the loftiest, its ideal of conduct austere, and it formed some of the noblest characters in Roman history. Stoic insistence that the prince is not the lord, but the servant of his people, and that his duty to them is an obligation from God anticipates what is nowadays called enlightened despotism. This conception was the foundation of policy under the Antonines and it influenced their enlightened predecessors.

There are in Stoicism obvious similarities and parallels to religious thought, and particularly to Christian thought. These were close enough to make it possible for Christians in the Middle Ages to claim that Seneca, the famous Stoic of the first century, had corresponded with St. Paul and had received his ideas from him. Perhaps the simplest way to discover how this belief could come about is to read the Meditations of the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius with one's Bible at hand. And it is this strongly religious aspect which explains why, as the traditional and official Graeco-Roman religion began to lose its hold on the upper classes, Stoicism could fill the vacuum for a time. This role, however, was strictly limited by the character of Stoicism itself. It was cold and detached, directed essentially to the mind, not to the heart and spirit; it concentrated upon this world and held out no hopes for the next; it was no longer at its best, but had moved in the direction of religious mysticism.
The great schools of philosophy were still open—they were not closed until 529—but they proved unable to prevent infiltration from the Orient, particularly of pseudosciences like astrology and its more degraded fellow, magic, and along with them an irrationality and a tawdry mysticism quite alien to the original character of Greek philosophy as it appears in Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno, the founder of Stoicism.

For the less educated, that is, for the masses within the Empire, formal Greek philosophy must have been largely a closed book. Some sort of “downward infiltration” of the major concepts of this body of thought, however, seems to have occurred on a fairly important scale and apparently gave life to the formal Roman state religion. But when the gradual erosion of belief in the traditional gods began to affect this lower section of society, it left the same kind of spiritual vacuum that it had among the upper classes.

Graeco-Roman Gods, Emperor-Worship, and Oriental Mystery Cults

There were still the gods of the Graeco-Roman pantheon, Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Mars, and others, which continued for long to enjoy the favor of the state and formed, indeed, part of the official state religion. More important was the cult of the deified emperors which was fostered by the government. In the eastern half of the Empire, where such practices had a long history, the reigning emperor was sometimes worshiped as a living god, but until the third century divine honors were only accorded by the Senate to the emperor after his death. In any event, by acknowledging the divinity of their rulers, the people in the provinces as in Rome expressed their loyalty to the Empire over whose
destinies the deified emperors presided. Emperor-worship, however, while it might serve as a powerful cement binding the disparate people of the Empire together in common devotion to the divine symbol of the state, satisfied few of the emotional and spiritual needs of mankind. The imperial cult was official and formal, cold and impersonal. It emphasized the subject's obligations to the state and its gods; it had no real appeal for human hearts. Men craved for a religion which would satisfy their individual aspirations and lighten the burden of existence. Since the Roman government permitted its subjects to worship whatever gods they wished, provided they also rendered homage to the gods of Rome, the imperial cult was no bar to the spread of other religions, and new gods helped fill the spiritual void.

The ancient household gods, the Lares and Penates, were still ever-present and worthy of devotion, while other gods of an earlier day continued to hold the favor of many in town and country. As men sought solace and help, there was, in fact, a revival of interest in half-forgotten local and national gods. Some Romans, especially in the humbler sections of society, fell back on ritual duties to gods far older than the receding ancestral gods of Rome, upon nature gods and fertility gods dating from the most primitive times. These survived in a bewildering array of local variations, although with a considerable common denominator of fundamental likeness. Such deities have an extraordinary appeal to simple folk and for this reason are almost indestructible. In the Roman Empire they had an especial appeal because they were identified with a timeless local tradition and sentiment far older than any rival the Empire itself had to offer.

In the second place the common folk of the Empire could turn to importations from abroad—almost wholly from the
Orient, the mother of religions. In general, the old gods of Rome lost popularity and were eclipsed by foreign gods, who reached out especially from the eastern provinces to attract a wider following. From Egypt came the Graeco-Oriental gods (Isis and Sarapis; from Asia Minor Magna Mater, or the Great Mother Goddess; from Syria various deities, especially Sol Invictus, the Invincible Sun; and from Persia came Mithras.)

Of all the Oriental gods which invaded the West, Mithras, militant god of the sun, was the most notable and perhaps the most formidable rival with which Christianity had to contend. From the earlier Zoroastrian religion of the Persian Empire, Mithraism adopted the idea of an eternal struggle between Ahura Mazda, god of light and goodness, and Ahriman, god of darkness and evil. Mithras was conceived by his followers as a warrior leading them in battle in behalf of Ahura Mazda. Long before our period of the Empire, Mithraism and the other eastern cults had spread beyond the confines of their homeland, gained a foothold in Rome and the western half of the Empire, and won great numbers of proselytes. As a civic duty men still worshiped the gods of the state, but they expressed their inmost personal faith by their devotion to the mystery cults. Rome had conquered the East; now she was being conquered by the gods of the East.

The Spread of the Mystery Cults

The unity of the Empire, the relative ease of communications, and the freedom of movement assured by the Pax Romana facilitated the spread of the Oriental religions. Even in Republican times slaves and freemen, migrating from Greece and the Near East, had brought their gods with
them. Under the Empire, as men traveled from one end of the Roman world to another, they helped propagate their religious beliefs. When they came west for business or to establish their residence, merchants and craftsmen from the Graeco-Oriental portions of the Empire continued to worship their native gods. So, too, when they were transferred to the West, soldiers of eastern origin or soldiers who had been stationed in the East and had there become devotees of native deities carried their gods with them. Their favorite was Mithras, whose military qualities naturally appealed to them. Wherever Roman troops were posted, they established shrines in honor of the warrior god, as abundant archaeological remains attest.

In general, as we have seen, the Roman government raised no objections to these alien cults. As long as their rites were not grossly immoral and as long as their devotees remained loyal to Rome and formally recognized the gods of the state and above all the cult of the deified emperor, their gods were tolerated. Indeed, several eastern religions won official recognition, and emperors themselves were sometimes fervent and even fanatical worshipers of the Oriental gods. As early as the Second Punic War, the Republican government had established at Rome the cult of the Great Mother Goddess of Asia Minor, and from time to time other eastern cults, notably that of Sol Invictus in the third century a.d., had won official favor, although at other times the state had banned or restricted the practice of such religions at Rome. When the government took such action, however, it was because it regarded these religions as a danger to public morals or a threat to the security of the state.

For their part the Oriental gods were neither jealous of one another nor mutually exclusive, and adherence to the
cult of one did not preclude devotion to another. A man might worship several gods, the ancient Olympians, Isis and Sarapis, Mithras, and always of course the deified emperors. In time, as the similarity of attributes of various gods came to be recognized, a process of syncretism began to take place, that is, attempts were made to reconcile and fuse different cults into something like a pagan monotheism. In the later third century, Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun, was widely recognized as a sovereign and universal deity whose particular attributes were revealed in the many local and individual cults of the Empire. Various emperors paid honor to the god, and Aurelian officially recognized the worship of the sun as a state cult. Although the victory of Christianity rendered this attempt to create a pagan monotheism abortive, the tentative beginnings in this direction indicate the essential tolerance displayed by Rome and her subjects toward religious innovations.

The Appeal of the New Cults

These circumstances provide only part of the explanation for the extraordinary popularity of the Oriental mystery religions. Despite the freedom and facility of movement, official toleration and active encouragement, the foreign gods would not have flourished so strongly unless men had been ready and eager to accept them. We have already seen how in the dark days of the third century, and even earlier under the deceptive tranquillity of the Antonine Age, men had turned to religions which offered divine aid and solace in this troubled world and a promise of redemption and a better life to come in the future. Most of these cults, whose devotees were drawn largely but not exclusively from the lower and middle classes, were secret societies to which mem-
bers were admitted only after a ritual of initiation. Upon their members they enjoined rigid rules of conduct which helped to bind them together. Their rites of worship gave the devotees an emotional satisfaction which they could not find in the formal and impersonal ceremonies of the civic and state cults. Groping desperately for relief from the misery of the present and seeking to alleviate the pain and burden of life, men eagerly accepted these cults. Their elaborate and sometimes orgiastic ritual and colorful ceremonial relieved the tedium of living and consoled the poor for their poverty. Their organization as societies gave men opportunities for fellowship and a sense of belonging to a group which had common interests and purposes. Above all, the mystery religions provided a respite from intolerable conditions and offered hope of personal immortality to men for whom this life seemed hopeless. Roman society in a time of mounting crisis was ripe for a religious revival, and the Oriental cults, which emphasized a personal and emotional religion, answered men's needs and therefore won a sympathetic reception. Their popularity in the second and third centuries is a measure of the increasing dissatisfaction of men with conditions in the Empire.

*The Early Christians*

Of the new religions which came in from the Roman East and strove for the allegiance of men, one triumphed over all its rivals and over the Empire itself. This was Christianity, which had its humble origins in the Roman province of Judaea among a group of disciples who soon after the reign of the emperor Augustus gathered around Jesus of Nazareth. At first these disciples addressed themselves to other Jews in Judaea, but soon they began to proselyte in
Jewish communities elsewhere in the East and then in the West, and it was not long before they won converts among devotees of other religions. The greatest of the converts was Paul the Apostle. By his missionary travels and activities he helped to transform a local religion into a universal one with a message for all, pagans as well as Jews. The new religion, however, did not enjoy immediately the popularity of some of the other eastern cults. The first converts were mainly drawn from the humblest class of society, slaves and freemen, from that class in the Roman world which A. J. Toynbee in his stimulating *Study of History* designates as the "internal proletariat," the section of society whose only stake in the Roman community was physical existence. Nevertheless, by the middle of the first century there were Christian groups in every important city in the East, in Rome itself, and probably elsewhere in the West. The *Pax Romana*, the unity of the Mediterranean world, and, above all, the need felt by men for a personal religion to take the place of the impersonal civic religion—these were some of the factors which facilitated the evangelical mission of Paul and others.

*The Imperial Attitude toward the Christians*

The Christians were ignored at first by the Roman government, which was accustomed to tolerate a host of gods and cults. Rome had granted religious freedom and even civil jurisdiction to the Jews; for a generation this freedom was also enjoyed by the Christians, who were regarded by the Roman government and the people as a Jewish sect. The Christians, however, soon came into conflict with the state. Their unwillingness to participate in the activities of the state, their concentration upon the salvation of the indi-
individual, and, above all, their intransigent refusal to acknowledge the gods of the state and especially the deified emperors even by formal and perfunctory worship made them objects of suspicion. We have noted that participation in the rites of the imperial cult was regarded as a positive test of loyalty to Rome. In contrast to the adherents of other religions which were tolerated by the government, the Christians were uncompromising monotheists. Their refusal to recognize Rome's gods set them off from the devotees of Mithras or Magna Mater and focused the attention of the government upon them. From the Roman point of view, by their unequivocal denial of the divinity of the emperors, the Christians revealed themselves as dangerous public enemies, guilty of disloyalty and treason, or at the very least atheism, since they attacked both the traditional gods of the state and the Oriental gods.

Their organization in societies which had not obtained the approval of the government was another basic reason for the distrust by the government. When the Christians began to develop an organization of their own, they seemed to be building a state within the state. For a long time their converts came from the lower classes of society, and the Christian teachings were regarded as having dangerously radical implications. Persecution, therefore, was not religious but political and stemmed from the desire of the emperors to check insubordination and subversive tendencies and to maintain the unity and integrity of the Empire. Moreover, ordinary men regarded their Christian fellows as clannish and antisocial and accused them of a general "hatred of the human race" or, more specifically, of horrible crimes. From many points of view the Christians seemed to be a disturbing factor in society.
The Persecutions

In 64 the emperor Nero made the Christians scapegoats for the great fire at Rome, and many were put to death after submitting to tortures. In general, however, the imperial government left it to local authorities to deal with the Christians; and during the first two centuries local magistrates or mobs, rather than the central government, were responsible for the sporadic persecution of Christians. The famous correspondence in 112 between the emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger, his governor in the eastern province of Bithynia, is the classic expression of the official policy of the Roman government. Christians were not to be sought out nor were anonymous accusations to be accepted. If, however, Christians were properly accused and convicted, they were to be punished. “Those, however, who deny their Christianity and prove their denial by praying to our gods, may wipe out past suspicions and secure a free pardon by their recantation.”

In the Antonine and Severan periods there was passive tolerance for the Christians or occasional persecution. That many Christians of the second century were permitted to defend their faith by apologetic writings suggests, indeed, a considerable tolerance on the part of the Antonine emperors. The great period of stress for Christianity coincided with the Empire’s time of troubles in the third century. Several emperors, especially Decius (249–251), instituted terrible persecutions throughout the Empire, for Christianity had by now become too strong to be dealt with by local authorities. Because of their attitude toward the state and its gods, the Christians seemed to be another of the forces which threatened the breakdown of the Empire in the
period of military anarchy. If the unity of the Empire was to be preserved, such recalcitrant and dangerous groups had to be destroyed. A decree issued by Decius required Christians and those suspected of Christian sympathies to prove their loyalty by the performance, in the presence of witnesses, of acts of sacrifice to the gods of the state. From Egypt have come several examples of affidavits signed by those who had conformed with the edict and certified by their witnesses. The Christians suffered grievously, but the church survived and even gained strength from its ordeal. The last great persecution was ordered by Diocletian, who sought to force the church to yield to the autocratic state as all other individuals and institutions had been compelled to do. Christians were excluded from the privileges of citizenship, many heads of the church were arrested, and church property was confiscated or destroyed.

The Development of Christianity

Despite the handicap of opposition and persecution, the number of Christians increased, and by the opening of the fourth century they were to be found in all the provinces of the Empire. Persecution only made the Christians more conscious of their mission, more energetic and more aggressive in their proselytizing efforts. They often welcomed the crown of martyrdom in order to demonstrate their zeal for their faith and to attract new converts. Converts were now being made among the upper classes of society, including intellectuals, who began to produce an intensive literature of defense against anti-Christian acts and writings. In their efforts to dispel misrepresentations about their religion, these writers helped to set forth the nature of the Christian faith and to develop its doctrines.
Among the greatest of the theologians in the late second and early third centuries were Clement and Origen, both from Alexandria, who employed pagan learning in the service of the Christian faith as they strove to harmonize Christianity and Greek philosophy. Origen in particular explained the Bible and especially the story of Creation in terms of Plato's philosophy and its fundamental dualism of mind and matter. According to Origen the material world was created for the correction and education of fallen "intelligences" who would be redeemed by Christ. This process of fall and redemption would be repeated an infinite number of times until matter would finally be completely overcome by Christ. In the West during these early centuries, other apologists, the fiery Tertullian in the Severan period, the erudite Arnobius in the third century, and his pupil Lactantius, the "Christian Cicero," defended the faith with eloquence and learning.

Growth of the Christian Hierarchy

The organization of the church was strengthened during this period, and Christians developed a proud self-consciousness that they belonged to a universal body. The small, independent communities which had made up the primitive church were being replaced by an ecclesiastical hierarchy modeled upon the Roman system of provincial administration. Originally administrative and religious functions had been performed by deacons, presbyters or elders, and bishops or overseers, all of whom were elected by the members of the congregations to which they belonged. Now the clergy was clearly differentiated from laymen, who ceased to participate actively in the administration of their church communities. More and more power was concen-
trated in the hands of the bishops, to whose authority the presbyters, now priests, were subject. The separate communities were brought together on a provincial or wider basis, and the bishops from the capitals of the Roman provinces gained the leadership in these larger units.

The Triumph of Christianity

Slowly and painfully, in the face of obstacles and opposition, Christianity was winning its way in the Roman world. Handicapped as no other religion was by the hostility of the government, Christianity nevertheless continued to make fresh converts on every level of society and everywhere in the Empire. Less than a generation after the great persecutions by Diocletian, the Roman emperor Constantine accepted Christianity as his own religion, and three-quarters of a century later the pagan cults were proscribed and banned, as Christianity had once been. What caused this remarkable reversal in the fortunes of the Christian church?

Those external factors which had fostered the spread of the Oriental mystery religions favored Christianity as well: the unity of the Roman world, the ease of communications, hard times from which men sought relief or escape. Like the eastern cults, Christianity offered a solution for many problems and gave assurance of salvation from sin and evil in a life to come. The spiritual appeal of Christianity was, however, apparently greater than that of any other religion from the East. It made no distinction between rich and poor, freeman and slave, male and female. Its ethical teachings were lofty: "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do unto them." It preached charity and brotherly love: "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"
Its theology was clear-cut and intelligible. That in certain respects, for example, in its discussion of heaven and hell and of a last judgment, it had analogies with other contemporary religions was an advantage, since it posed these problems in terms familiar to devotees of these religions. The Christian teachings were clearly stated in the Old and the New Testament, and in time learned Christians both in the Greek East and the Latin West helped to develop the doctrines of the church. Beginning with Paul, effective missionaries spread the message of Christianity to the Roman world. Their task was facilitated because, unlike the Oriental cults, none of which had a central organization, Christianity was a universal religion whose separate communities were in close communication with each other. It was not long before these separate churches were drawn together into a tightly knit organization under the control of a disciplined body of administrative and religious officials. This too was a powerful asset to Christianity. Moreover, men were prepared to die for their faith. “The blood of the martyrs the seed of the church,” is more than a vivid phrase. It describes the zeal and enthusiasm which Christianity inspired in its followers. For every Christian martyr the church gained hundreds of converts, many of whom were impressed by the heroism of those who chose death rather than a denial of their religion. Most important of all the factors which attracted men to Christianity was the appeal of an historic founder who had appeared not in a remote past, but in recent times and in the Roman Empire.

The Christian Roman Empire

In 313, by the so-called Edict of Milan, the emperor Constantine and his colleague Licinius granted toleration to the
Christians and gave their religion equal status with others. A few years later Constantine himself became a Christian. Whether this action was dictated, as some historians have held, by motives of political expediency, or whether, as seems more probable, it stemmed from religious conviction and conversion, it helped to assure the victory of Christianity. The emperor did not make Christianity the religion of the state nor did he ban other religions, but his zeal for Christianity was intense. As he strove valiantly to maintain a unified church in a united state, he extended special privileges to the religion which he himself had accepted. When Constantine died in 337, the Empire was clearly Christian, and this was emphasized a few years later when the official ceremonies in honor of the pagan gods were abolished. To be sure, the emperor Julian (361–363) made a futile effort to restore paganism by creating a universal pagan creed on the Christian model. His last words, “Pale Galilean, thou hast conquered,” may be apocryphal, but they epitomize the actual state of affairs. Within a few years Christianity had become the official religion of Rome. The emperor Theodosius I (378–395) declared the pagan worship illegal, and as the state had once sought to destroy Christianity, so now it launched a bitter campaign to suppress paganism. In the course of a century a persecuted religion had become not merely the official religion of the state, but the only legally recognized and privileged religion in the Roman Empire.

The peril from the state was thus finally overcome, but victory posed many knotty problems for the church: how to deal with sectarian strife within the church; what was to be accepted as orthodox belief; what kind of life was the truly Christian; how to create an administrative machine
adequate for an expanding organization with temporal as well as spiritual concerns? We shall describe later some of the solutions which the church found for these problems.

Christianity became the dominant religion of the western world and transformed its civilization in many ways. If Christianity was not, as Gibbon believed it was, one of the major causes of the decline of the Roman Empire, its victory signified the decline of ancient civilization. When the Empire passed away, the church succeeded and superseded it. Upon the foundation of the triumphant Christian religion the new world of the Middle Ages was slowly erected.
CHAPTER IV

Decline and Fall

FROM St. Augustine (354–430), in whose lifetime Italy and Rome were overrun by barbarian invaders, to the present, historians, philosophers, and theologians have sought an answer to one of the central problems of history: what caused the decline of the Roman Empire? What were the forces of dissolution? What were the weaknesses in the Roman Empire? What, in the words of the great eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon, were “the most important circumstances of its decline and fall: a revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the Earth?”

For each generation the question has had a topical as well as a historical interest. Consciously or not, men have sensed in that decline a foreshadowing of the fate of their own civilization and have tried, by seeking the causes of Rome’s decline, to escape the same misfortune. Their own basic assumptions about the meaning of history, their own philosophy of history, have inevitably dictated the answers which men have given to the question.

Historical Explanations of the Decline

To Ammianus Marcellinus (born c.330), the last great Roman historian, a decline in personal morality was the