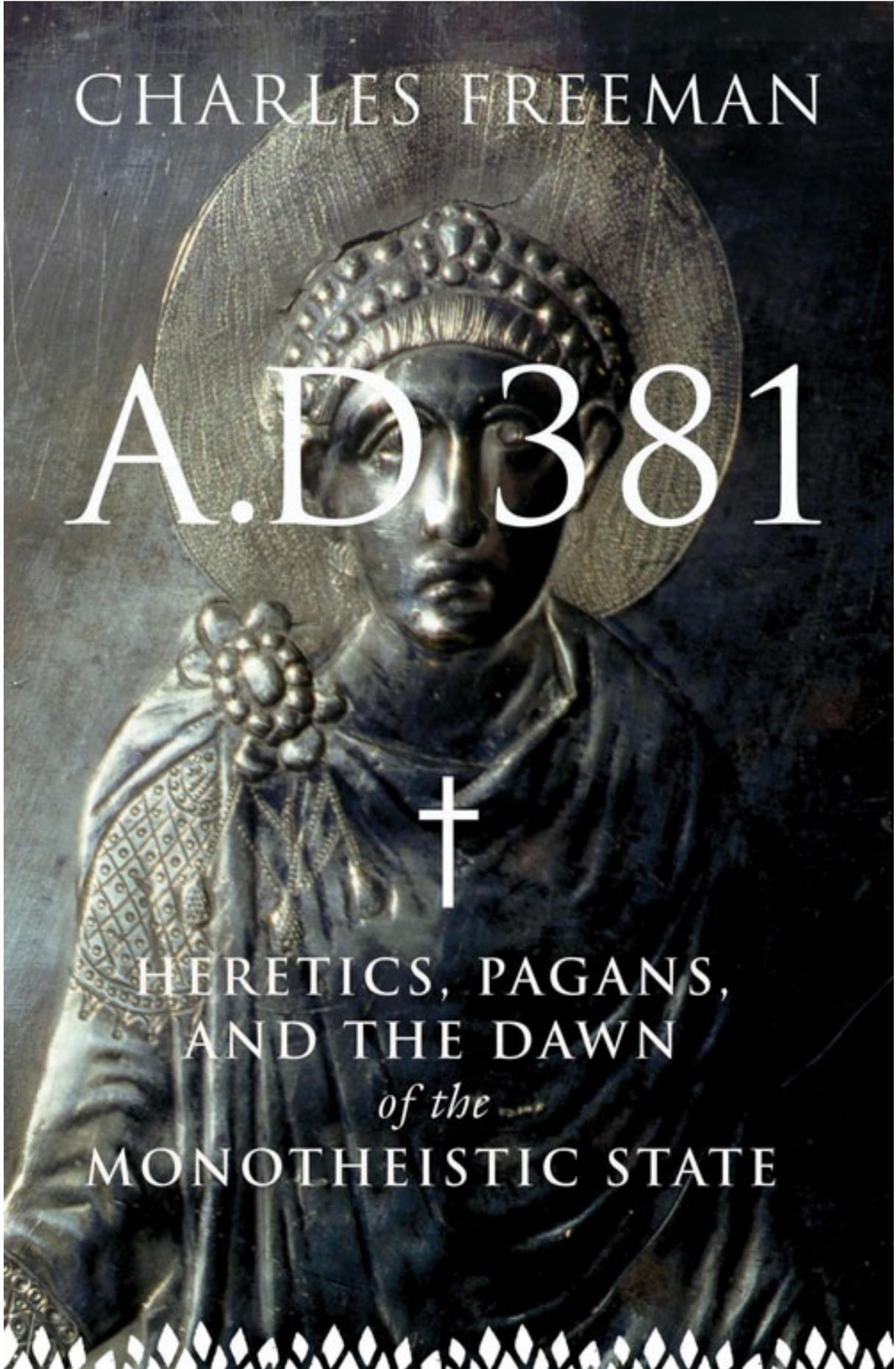


CHARLES FREEMAN

A.D. 381



HERETICS, PAGANS,
AND THE DAWN
of the
MONOTHEISTIC STATE



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THE OVERLOOK PRESS
NEW YORK

First published in the United States in 2009 by
The Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc.

NEW YORK:
141 Wooster Street
New York, NY 10012
www.overlookpress.com

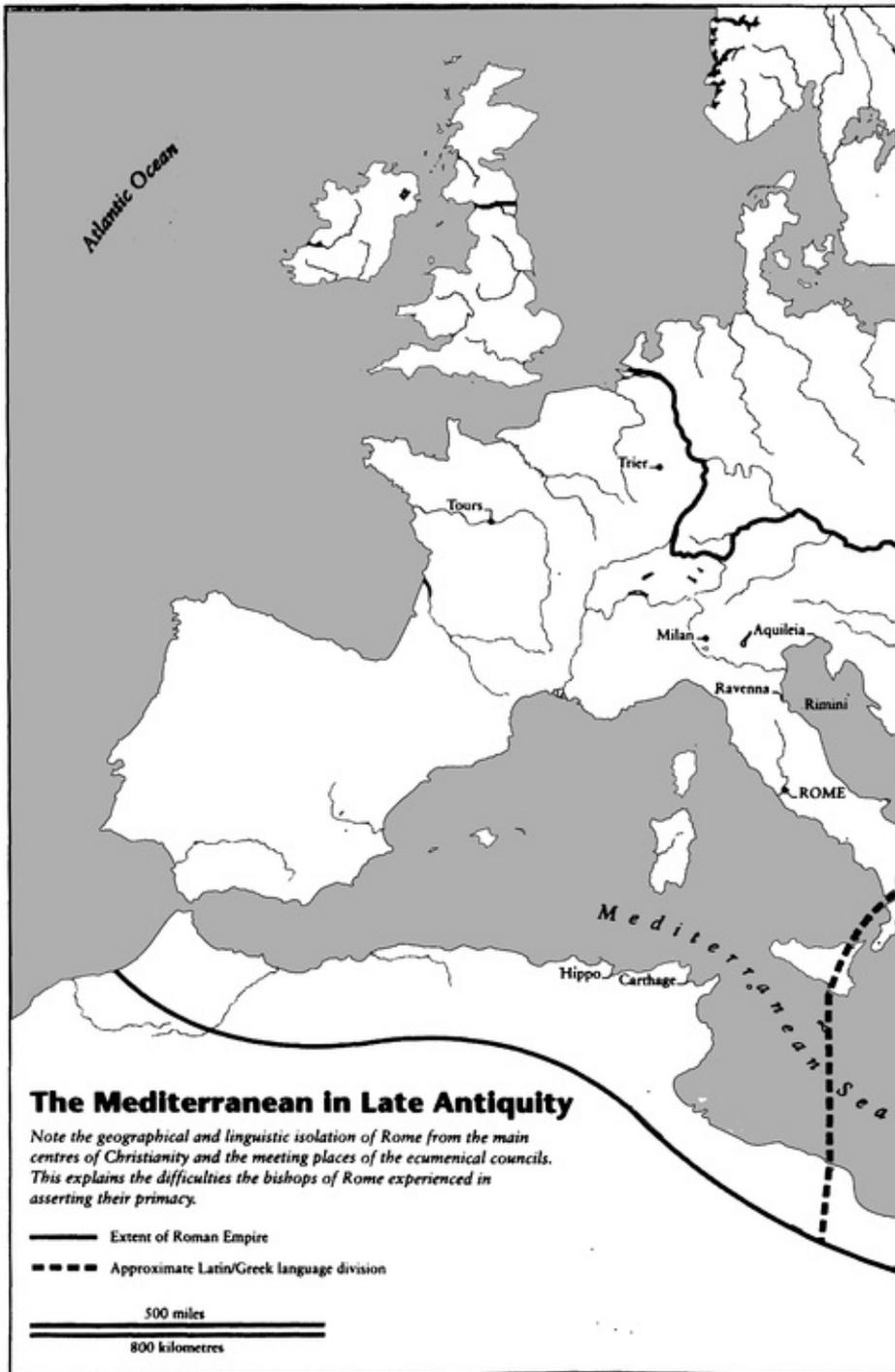
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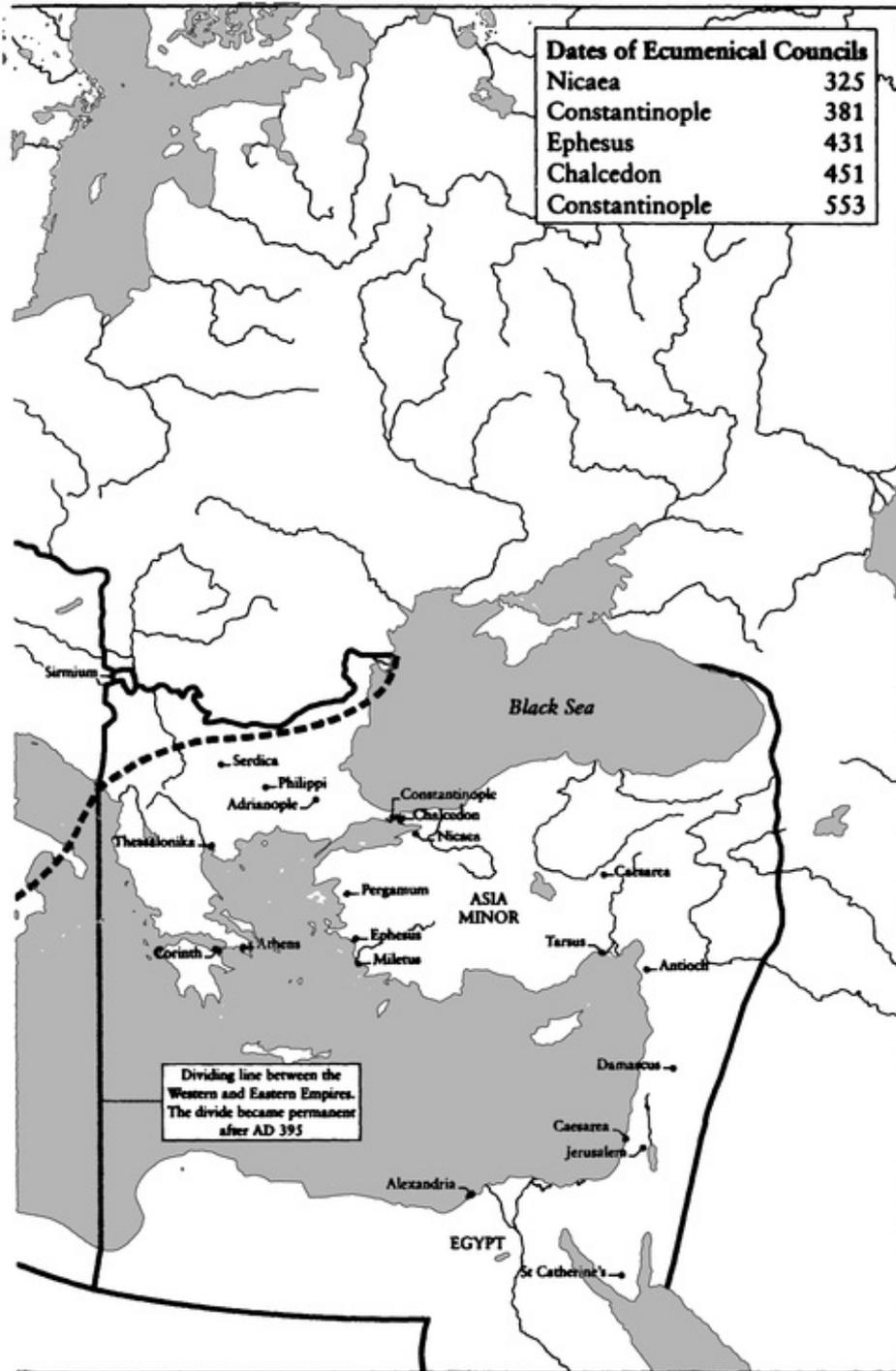
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Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress

eISBN : 978-1-590-20522-8

For my children, Barney, Issie, Tom and Cordy,
in the knowledge that they will continue to think freely and
creatively about the things that enthuse them





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The number of books published each year has reached record levels but, paradoxically, it has become more difficult for a writer to get a book accepted. So I am thankful to my agent, Bill Hamilton, for placing *AD 381* with Will Sulkin at Pimlico. Will helped clarify the central themes of the book while, after it was completed, Jörg Hensgen offered effective guidance for tidying the text and tightening the argument. I am very grateful to them both. The text has been copy-edited with great care by Jane Selley and the index has been compiled by Oula Jones. My thanks are due to them both.

PREFACE

IN 1999 I signed a contract to write a book that was given the provisional title *The Triumph of Hellenism*. Its aim was to bring together some of the recent scholarship focusing on Greek culture under the Roman Empire. One of the benefits of Roman stability had been to allow the Greeks to consolidate their cultural dominance over the eastern empire while also maintaining a record of impressive intellectual achievement. Some of the finest minds of the Greek world, Plutarch, Ptolemy, Galen and Plotinus, were working in the early centuries AD and the quality of education for the elite remained extraordinarily high. An early-fifth-century philosopher, Synesius of Cyrene, gave a definition of a Hellene, by which he meant a pagan Greek, as one 'able to associate with men on the basis of a knowledge of all worthwhile literature'. Particularly impressive was the networking of this elite in the distribution to each other of copies of major works in almost every discipline. That literature circulated widely in the Christian as in the pagan world.

Having signed the contract and begun to work on the structure of the book, I had to provide a chapter or two on how the tradition of rational thought, which the Greeks had done so much to define, came to an end. For Edward Gibbon, in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, intellectual life was already stagnant in the early Christian centuries, but this was clearly not the case. The rediscovery by modern scholarship of the cultural vitality of these centuries meant that new explanations were needed for its disappearance. In a Gibbonesque moment, sitting on the edge of the Roman forum, close to where Gibbon himself had been inspired to write his great work, I began looking at the spread of church buildings into the historic pagan centre. Just at a time when the empire was under severe pressure, close in fact to collapse in the west, resources were being shifted from the ancient temples and buildings to opulent churches. Did this reflect a similar shift of the ideology that underpinned the society of late antiquity? My research set off in a new and unexpected direction as I began realising the extent to which the Church had benefited from but had also been shaped by the patronage of the state. After the granting of toleration to Christians by Constantine in 313, an important new phase in Christian history began during which the Church became associated with massive buildings, support of the empire's objectives in war and a tightening up of authority as emperors such as Theodosius limited the freedom to discuss spiritual matters by both Christians and pagans. A new book rose from the contract of the old. It was later published as *The Closing of the Western Mind*.¹

I was more than happy with the interest and discussion that the subject aroused. Despite some caricatures of my book as an attack on Christianity per se (and the criticism that I was reviving old, discredited arguments even though I was, in fact, responding to new research), most readers accepted the central premise that the Church had become politicised by the state, and the most thoughtful reviews saw the analogy between the fourth century, and the United States of the early twenty-first century where a similar relationship between Church and state appeared to be in the

making. It was good to see the number of churches in the United States that chose *Closing* as one of their discussion books. I had protected my argument by adding a hundred pages of notes detailing the evidence for my argument, and there was no comprehensive attack on my thesis based on an analysis of this evidence. So I went on to other projects. Perhaps my temperament is to blame, but I needed a break from the abusive letters of Jerome, the posturings of Ambrose of Milan and the ever more gloomy prognostications of Augustine. This had never been intended to be my subject and there was no reason to stay with it.

One response, however, continued to bother me. It was the criticism that I had set out to oppose Christianity. I am not particularly drawn to organised religion but I enjoy many religious activities, especially listening and talking to those who have read widely in spiritual literature, Christian or otherwise. In fact, I believe that a spiritual dimension is part of any healthy mind. It is surely right to reflect on values that go beyond the purely material, and I find the somewhat frenzied denunciations of Richard Dawkins and his supporters simplistic. Human beings have always organised themselves to participate in what can only be called 'religious' activities and to speculate on what may or may not lie beyond the material world. They have gained great comfort from their shared involvement in these activities. How Professor Dawkins imagines one can ringfence this aspect of human behaviour and somehow eliminate it is not clear. (One thing I notice about Dawkins' work is that he has no sense of the emotions that drive people to search for religious meaning.) Where I have difficulty is being asked to believe one dogma or another on grounds of 'faith' when there is no rational underpinning for that dogma. One can surely combine a sense of the spiritual, an understanding of the importance of ritual, without having to express this in absolute statements of what God might or might not be. Often, as in the case discussed in this book, one can, in fact, pinpoint the specific historical and even political, rather than theological, context in which an item of belief became privileged over alternatives and was then transformed into dogma.

Ever since Christianity became deeply embedded in the structure of secular societies, there has been a debate over the extent to which religion and civilisation reinforce each other. This debate seems to lead nowhere largely because what is meant by 'civilisation' and 'Christianity' has fluctuated so widely. There were Christian churches that supported apartheid in South Africa, Christians who led the fight against it. Earlier there were Christians who claimed that the Bible showed that God had decreed the state of slavery. 'Slavery is God's punishment for sin', as Augustine put it in his *City of God*. I am reminded of the nineteenth-century bishop of Vermont who expressed his personal revulsion for slavery but who acknowledged that his 'frail intellect' on the subject had to be overruled by the authority of God on the matter as clearly expressed in the scriptures. Despite this apparently divine support for the institution, it was Christians who initiated the abolition of slavery. Again, in the twelfth century Bernard of Clairvaux, the scourge of the brilliant Abelard, was able to opine, 'Let him who has scanned the heavens go down to the depths of Hell.' It is equally possible to conceive of a (Christian) God who has created the world to run according to stable natural laws and who exults in giving human beings reasoning minds to discover and understand them. Newton was one of these, even though he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. So there are traditions within Christianity (and

other religions) that have opposed scientific investigation and others that have supported it. Similarly, while Francis of Assisi preached poverty, he was soon commemorated in his home town after his death by some of the most costly and beautiful buildings of the Middle Ages.

It seems, in fact, that the churches have been able to survive largely because Christianity has proved so astonishingly flexible. The early Church was Jewish, the 'Greek' Church of the second century often strongly anti-Jewish. In the third century there were campaigns of persecution of the Church so that, in the 250s and early fourth century, it operated as an underground organisation drawing strength from its martyrs. By 350, it was part of the structure of the empire, housed in opulent buildings and giving full support for the empire's wars. The sheer range of the texts that eventually came to make up the Bible has allowed theological and historical interpretations to shift with time. Fundamentalists claim to be returning to an original Christianity based on biblical texts, seemingly unaware that as early as the third century, Christian scholars such as Origen were arguing that the scriptures, at a time when the New Testament was still not in its final form, needed to be interpreted allegorically rather than literally. Who are the traditionalists here? The gospels have been interpreted to provide a Jesus for any occasion. Even in the past twenty years, there have been scholarly 'biographies' of the historical Jesus which have described him alternatively as a violent revolutionary ready to take up the sword against Roman oppression; an early feminist who elevated women to a higher status than traditional Jewish society allowed; an apocalyptic prophet ushering in God's reign on earth; a proto-Marxist social reformer urging an economic and social revolution; a Hasid, or Jewish holy man, of whom there were many other examples; and even a Greek-style Cynic philosopher who preached the renunciation of all worldly goods. Republicans in the United States have been able to find a proto-capitalist Christ, the gospel texts ingeniously reread in support of free enterprise. One of the most interesting transformations has been from the Jesus of whom Ernest Renan (1823-92) stated in his famous *Life* (1863) that 'fundamentally there was nothing Jewish', to the full acknowledged Jewishness of Jesus in recent scholarship. I was not surprised to hear from an Anglican vicar friend that the section of his library that dates most quickly is that on theology.

It is not only the interpretation of particular texts that has shifted with writer and period. In the fourth century, when Christianity became an integral part of the Roman state, attention shifted from the gospels to the Old Testament, which provided scriptural support for a ruler appointed by God whose status depended on success in war. By the end of the century Augustine is drawing heavily on the letters of Paul to provide intellectual backbone for his own theology, and his Christology, the study of the nature of Christ as revealed in the gospels, is relatively undeveloped in comparison. Any serious study of the history and present state of theology needs to include an analysis of which texts, from the wide variety available in the Bible, are being selected as most helpful in supporting the ideology of the day. One is reminded by Allen Dwight Callahan in *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* that biblical texts that are unknown to white Christians have enormous potency among black communities, which are heirs to slavery and colonialism.²

So any argument that in general terms Christianity saved or destroyed civilisation,

rational thought or whatever has to be qualified by a study of the specific historical and social context for which the statement is being made. When one reads that European civilisation is based on Christian values, one has to ask which of the enormously wide range of 'values' Christians have supported over the centuries are the relevant ones and whether some obviously important values, such as religious toleration, did not have to fight for survival against the attempts of the churches to suppress them. Too often specific values are proclaimed to be 'Christian' without any explanation of when or how the Church fostered or supported them. It is often asserted, for instance, that the churches promoted individualism and progress despite the evidence that Augustine's pessimism about the fallen, and thus helpless, nature of humankind was the prevalent ideology in Europe as late as the seventeenth century. I would argue instead that the historian should look closely at how specific manifestations of Christianity related to the wider dimensions of the society in which it found itself, and this is what I tried to do in *The Closing of the Western Mind*. I had no doubts, and still have none, that the Greek tradition of free-ranging intellectual thought was challenged by the specific ways in which Christianity manifested itself in the fourth and fifth centuries as the servant of an authoritarian state. After the collapse of the empire in the west, a very different Christianity emerged and faced a range of new challenges in the fragmented and often economically devastated societies of post-Roman Europe. So one starts a new chapter, a new analysis of how a Christianity that had flourished in the literate urban communities of late antiquity adapted to survival in rural societies in which literacy was almost nonexistent. Personally I find this approach to church history fruitful and absorbing.

In this book, I focus more closely on the important transitions that took place in the relationship between Church and state in the last thirty years of the fourth century. These seem to be crucial to the understanding of later developments in Christian thought and institutions. I stress the central role of the emperors, especially Theodosius I, AD 379-395, in defining Christian doctrine. The power of the emperor was such and the crises that faced his empire so immense that Theodosius chose to champion one faction of Christians, the supporters of Nicaea, over its rivals. He not only isolated what were now described in law as 'heretics' but attempted to suppress pagan thought as well. By doing so, he assaulted two important bastions of Greco-Roman civilisation. The first was a tradition of sophisticated debate that included both Christian and pagan thinkers, which retained its intellectual pre-eminence precisely because it could operate in comparative freedom. I argue, in particular, that the theological conflicts of the fourth century, before 381, may have been as erudite and penetrating, certainly as wide-ranging, as any that followed in the centuries to come. It is probably not until the thirteenth century, in the crucial debates over the place of reason in theology, that one finds anything as sophisticated - and that is largely because of the brilliance of Thomas Aquinas. The second was an understanding, matured over many centuries, of the importance of not only freedom of speech but also religious toleration. In the 360s, the court orator Themistius can be found arguing before the Christian emperor Jovian that religious belief could not be controlled by the state and that in fact 'God' *enjoyed* being worshipped in a variety of ways. It is one of the tragedies of western thought that this approach was, in effect, suppressed as a result of Theodosius' decrees against 'heretics' and pagans in the last quarter of that

same century. So even Aquinas lived under continual threat of excommunication, with the promise of eternal punishment in hell (a concept unknown in the Greek world) that accompanied it. It is not until the seventeenth century that the concept of religious toleration is restated, and that was only after decades of debilitating religious wars showed, in the specific context of post-Reformation Europe, the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of institutional religion.

AD 381 is designed to be read independently of *The Closing of the Western Mind*. This does mean, of course, that there is some overlap in material between the two books. I have provided sources for quotes and given some suggestions for further reading but not the full panoply of references I provided in *Closing*. Those who want a fuller background to the suppression of the thought of the pagan world should return to *Closing*, where the background to the issues is presented in much fuller detail in the text and supporting notes.

I do not belong to an academic institution, although I have taught ancient history on the University of Cambridge's extramural programme. I believe that the best way to write with breadth and liveliness is to be involved in other activities that have little or nothing to do with the book I am writing so that I always return to it with vigour. The best ideas always come when one is least expecting them, often because a new situation challenges a conventional approach to an issue. So my thanks are not so much to academic comrades with whom I have discussed this book as to colleagues in other areas. There are those who come on my study tours to Italy (and who often look at great treasures in unexpected ways) and those with whom I work at the Blue Guides, where I serve as historical consultant. I revel in being asked why an eighth-century icon has ended up in a museum in Florence or to present a summary of Ruskin's views on Venice. Perhaps most stimulating of all has been my thirty-year involvement with the International Baccalaureate's Theory of Knowledge course, a student-centred introduction to critical thinking skills. Working with colleagues, now close friends, from all over the world and from a variety of disciplines, our debates are models of what intellectual enquiry should be. When I read of friends copying out and circulating manuscripts to each other across the fourth-century world, I feel at home with them for this very reason. The papyrus roll or parchment codex might have taken longer to arrive than an e-mail, but arrive it did with a degree of efficiency that was remarkable. It would be many, many centuries before literate elites would communicate again so easily across the Mediterranean world (and some would argue we have not yet recovered the freedom of debate enjoyed then). I hope that the traditions of toleration and free enquiry survive somewhat better in the twenty-first century than they did in the fourth.

Charles Freeman

NOTE ON SOURCES AND TERMINOLOGY

ALTHOUGH it is one of the arguments of this book that the story of AD 381 and the impact of Theodosius on the way Christianity came to be defined has been ‘forgotten’, this is not because there is a lack of original sources. My description of the Council of Constantinople of that year might appear shocking to those who have been brought up on the idea that it deserved the status of an ecumenical council or achieved a consensus on the Trinity. However, the contemporary accounts suggest otherwise. One of its own chairmen, Gregory of Nazianzus, has left a graphic, if self-pitying, account of the chaos, and the fact that the Council was not even able to publish its revised version of the Nicene creed in the hostile environment of Constantinople speaks volumes. In this book I have relied heavily on accounts by historians such as Socrates and Sozomen, who were writing shortly after the events described. Likewise the activities of the leading figures, such as Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and Epiphanius, are well documented in their letters, sermons and standard biographies. I do not lay any claim to originality in setting out the events as they were recorded at the time or shortly afterwards. I have provided details in the Notes of the original sources I have used.

The legislation of Theodosius I and his successors also survives and is referred to when appropriate. All ‘general’ laws from 312 to 438 were collected in the law code drawn up by Theodosius II in 438, which was later used in the west and so remains intact. Although there is some argument as to how effectively laws were enforced (and some may have been no more than imperial propaganda), the Theodosian Code shows just how widespread was the suppression of beliefs, both Christian and pagan, that conflicted with Nicene orthodoxy after 381. I remain totally unconvinced by those who argue that Christianity preserved reason and freedom of thought after 381, not least because such accounts usually make no attempt to confront or even recognise the mass of evidence, much of it unrelated to Theodosius’ legislation, that contradicts them.

As regards terminology, the term ‘Nicene Trinity’ is a difficult one to define, but for reasons that will become clear as this book progresses, it came to provide the cornerstone of orthodox Christianity and so a workable definition is essential. The Trinity consists of three separate entities, God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One approach (the ‘Arian’, although I prefer to use the term ‘subordinationist’ in this book) suggested that they were arranged in a hierarchy, the Father superior to the Son, whom He created, and both superior to the Holy Spirit. At the Council of Nicaea of 325, however, it was decreed that God the Father and Jesus the Son were ‘of one substance’. They had each existed for eternity and there was no question of Son being subordinate to Father. Nicaea said little about the status of the Holy Spirit, but by the time of the Council of Constantinople of 381, many Christians were arguing that the Holy Spirit enjoyed equal status alongside the other two. One could talk therefore of one Godhead consisting of three personalities, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, even if it was to prove immensely difficult to find the terminology to define the

relationship between them. This is what is normally referred to as the Nicene Trinity in this text. However, Nicaea was a Greek council, with virtually no participants from the Latin-speaking west of the empire. In the west, Christians tended to refer to the three members of the Trinity in rather general terms, such as 'of equal majesty'. As this formulation accepts their equal status, the term Nicene Trinity is extended here to include this western approach, which is also close to the terminology used by the (Spanish) Theodosius in his legislation even when he issued this in the east. Strictly speaking, however, eastern and western Trinities remained distinct. The most important western work on the Trinity, Augustine's *De Trinitate*, owed nothing to Greek theology.

'Paganism' is another term that is difficult to use. Historians normally talk of three distinct religious groups for this period - Christians, Jews and pagans. Paganism includes belief not only in the ancient gods of Greece and Rome and the plethora of other religious movements that are to be found in the late empire, but in all its major philosophies in so far as they were neither Jewish nor Christian. So the term 'pagan' includes much more than simply religious beliefs, and this should be borne in mind when it is used here.

As a study of the publication dates of books listed in the Bibliography shows, there is a mass of new research in this area which I have attempted to incorporate in my text.

INTRODUCTION

IN January 381, the Christian Roman emperor Theodosius issued an *epistula*, a formal letter, to his prefect in the Danube provinces of Illyricum announcing that the only acceptable form of Christianity centred on a Trinity in which God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit were seen as of equal majesty. Theodosius went on to condemn all other Christian beliefs as heresies that would be punished by both the state and the divine judgement of God. By July, the law had been extended across the whole of the eastern empire and then, in the 380s, to the west. Within a few years Theodosius had also moved to ban most forms of pagan worship, in effect challenging the religious and spiritual activities of the majority of his subjects.

It was a pivotal moment in classical and, indeed, European, history. Never before in the Greek or Roman world had there been such a sweeping imposition of a single religious belief alongside the active suppression of alternatives. The only precedent comes from ancient Egypt when the pharaoh Akhenaten replaced the mass of Egyptian deities with the single sun-god Aten in the fourteenth century BC - and even this policy was quickly reversed by his successors. Theodosius' decrees were especially startling because less than sixty years earlier, in 313, the emperor Constantine had issued, with his co-emperor Licinius, an Edict of Toleration in which he promised 'that no one whatsoever should be denied freedom to devote himself either to the cult of the Christians or to such religion as he deems best suited for himself'. As late as the 360s, the principle of freedom of speech and thought was being proclaimed by the court orators as essential to a healthy society.

Theodosius was not himself a fanatical Christian, and despite the harshness of the language in which his decrees were expressed, he showed some restraint and flexibility in the way he applied them. In a vast and administratively unwieldy empire, any law lost its impact as it filtered down into the provinces, and some may never have been systematically enforced.¹ However, this worked both ways - a law might be ignored, or it might be imposed with brutality by a local enthusiast. Several of Theodosius' Christian officials, particularly those he brought with him to the eastern empire from the west, acted with a ruthlessness that the emperor could not condone. Many launched violent attacks on pagan shrines and their occupants. Whatever the emperor had intended, the free discussion of spiritual matters was constrained in the Christian world for centuries to come. The Roman legal system was adapted so as to be able to target and remove dissidents, whether pagan or Christian. With the collapse of the empire in the west, the Church took over the powers of the state in which it had acquiesced under Theodosius, and by the twelfth century, Church and state were again united in suppressing freedom of religious thought. One has to wait until the seventeenth century before the principle of religious toleration, so deep-rooted a part of ancient society, was reasserted in Europe.

The story, as this book hopes to show, is well documented, but an alternative narrative, that the Church itself came to a consensus on the nature of the Godhead, is still the dominant one in histories of Christianity. The 'consensus' approach glosses

over the violent antagonisms the debates over doctrine aroused and the pre-eminent role the emperors played in their resolution. Again there is seldom any mention, in this 'alternative narrative', of the other intellectual and spiritual traditions, many of which were rooted in the use of reason, that withered as a result of the emperors' interventions. The 380s were truly a turning point, and the story of how freedom of thought was suppressed needs to be brought back into the mainstream of the history of European thought. This is what this book aims to do.