The communism of antiquity

by Alain de Benoist

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In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche does not hesitate to affirm that:

> What stood as *aere perennius*,[1] the *imperium Romanum*, the most magnificent form of organization ever to be achieved under difficult conditions, compared to which everything before or after has just been patched together, botched and dilettantish, those holy anarchists made a 'piety' out of destroying 'the world', which is to say the *imperium Romanum*, until every stone was overturned…

> Christianity was the vampire of the imperium Romanum, – overnight, it obliterated the Romans' tremendous deed of laying the ground for a great culture *that had time*. – You still don't understand? The *imperium Romanum* that we know, that we are coming to know better through the history of the Roman provinces, this most remarkable artwork in the great style was a beginning, its design was calculated to *prove* itself over the millennia – nothing like it has been built to this day, nobody has even dreamed of building on this scale, *sub specie aeterni* [2]– This organization was stable enough to hold up under bad emperors: the accident of personalities cannot make any difference with things like this, –*first* principle of all great architecture. But it was not stable enough to withstand the *most corrupt* type of corruption, to withstand *Christians*…

> This secretive worm that crept up to every individual under the cover of night, fog, and ambiguity and sucked the seriousness for *true* things, the instinct for *reality* in general right out of every individual, this cowardly, feminine, saccharine group gradually alienated the 'souls' from that tremendous structure, – those valuable, those masculine-noble natures that saw Rome's business as their own business, their own seriousness, their own *pride*.

> The priggish creeping around, the conventicle secrecy, dismal ideas like hell, like the sacrifice of the innocent, like the *unio mystica*[3] in the drinking of blood, above all the slowly fanned flames of revenge, of Chandala revenge – *that* is what gained control over Rome, the same type of religion that Epicurus had already waged war against in its pre-existent form. You should read Lucretius to see *what* Epicurus had fought, *not* paganism but 'Christianity', I mean the corruption of the soul through the ideas of guilt, punishment, and immortality. – He fought the *subterranean* cults, the whole of latent Christianity, – at that time, to deny immortality was nothing less than *salvation*.

In his account of the wars against the Persians, Herodotus attributes the success of the small Greek cities against the mighty Iranian Empire to the 'intellectual superiority' of their compatriots. Would he also have explained their decline by their

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[1] A line from Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities*.

[2] From the standpoint of eternity.

[3] Mystical union.

'inferiority'? The question of why cultures disappear and empires collapse has always preoccupied historians and philosophers. In 1441, Leonardo Bruni spoke of the *vacillatio* of the Roman Empire; his contradictor, Flavio Biondo, preferred the term *inclinatio* (which summed up, for Renaissance man, the abandonment of ancient customs). The debate was already set: was the Empire destroyed or collapsed on its own? For Spengler, the *alternations* that have occurred throughout history are the result of *inevitability*. The identifiable causes of a decline are only secondary causes. They accentuate, and accelerate a process, but they can only intervene when that process has begun. But it is also possible to think that no internal necessity fixes an end to cultures: when they die, it is because someone kills them. André Piganiol's opinion is well known: 'Roman civilisation did not die a natural death. It was assassinated' (*L'Empire chrétien*,1947). In this case, the responsibility of the 'assassins' is complete. However, we can admit that only structures already very weakened, devoid of energy, abandon themselves to the blow that wounds them, to the enemy on the prowl. Voltaire, who was, after Machiavelli, one of the first to speak of historical cycles, said that the Roman Empire had fallen simply because it existed, 'since everything must have an end' (*Philosophical Dictionary*, 1764).

We will not attempt here to find out whether or not the fall of Rome was irremediable, or even to identify all the factors that contributed to its fall, but to examine what responsibility the nascent Christianity bears for its fall.
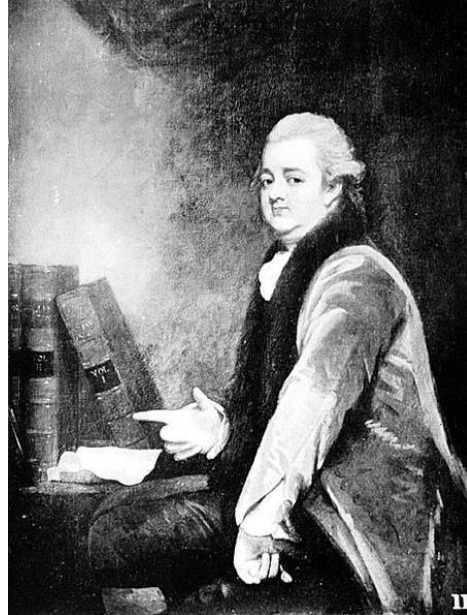
It is well known that it was the Briton Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) who first established that responsibility, in chapters XV and XVI of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, six thick volumes of which appeared between 1776 and 1778. Before him, in 1576, Löwenklav had defended Emperor Julian, whose talent, temperance and generosity he praised, thus opening a breach in the doctrine which

claimed that Christian emperors had been, by the privilege of their faith alone, superior to pagans. Shortly afterwards, the jurisconsult and diplomat Grotius (1583-1645) endorsed Erasmus' thesis on the Germanic origin of the Neo-Latin aristocracies. Finally, in 1743, Montesquieu attributed the decline and fall of Rome to various factors, such as the extinction of the old families, the loss of civic spirit, the degeneration of institutions, the collusion between administrative power and business fortunes, the high birth rate of the foreign population, the wavering loyalty of the legions, and so on. Better documented than his predecessors, Gibbon took up all these elements anew, ready to write an 'unbiased history'. His conclusions, tinged with an irony inherited from Pascal, remain essentially valid.

In the 19th century, Otto Seeck (*History of the Decline of the Ancient World*, 1894), drawing on an idea of Montesquieu, as well as certain considerations of Burckhardt (in his *Epoch of Constantine*, 1852-1853) and Taine, insisted on a biological and demographic factor: the disappearance of the elites (*Ausrottung der Besten*), accompanied by the senescence of institutions and the importance gained by the plebs and the crowd of slaves, who constituted the first clientele of Christian preachers. This thesis was adopted by M.P. Nilsson (*Imperial Rome*, 1926), after having been confirmed by Tenney Frank, who, after examining some 13,900 funerary inscriptions, concluded that, from the 2nd century onwards, 90% of the population of Rome was of foreign origin (*American Historical Review*, XXI, 1916, p. 705).

In *Marcus Aurelius* (1895), Renan made his own one of Nietzsche's formulas: 'During the third century, Christianity sucks in ancient society like a vampire'. And he added this sentence, which echoes so many times today: 'In the third century, the Church, by monopolising life, exhausted civil society, bled it, made it empty. Small societies killed big society' (pp. 589 and 590). In 1901, Georges Sorel (1847-1922) published an essay on *The Ruin of the Ancient World*. 'The action of Christian ideology,' he argued, 'broke down the structure of the ancient world like a mechanical force working from within. Far from being able to say that the new religion infused new lifeblood into an ageing organism, we might say that it left it exhausted. It severed the ties between the spirit and social life, and sowed everywhere the seeds of quietism, despair and death'.

For his part, Michael Rostovtzeff (*Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, 1926), opposing Seeck on certain points, and also Max Weber (*Social Origins of the Decline of Ancient Civilisation*, 1896), posed an essential question: 'Is it possible to extend a high civilisation to the lower classes without lowering its level, without diluting its value to the point of making it disappear? Is not all civilisation, from the moment it begins to penetrate the masses, doomed to decadence?' Ortega y Gasset was to answer him, in *The Revolt of the Masses:* 'The history of the Roman Empire is also the history of subversion, of the empire of the masses, who absorb and annul the ruling minorities and take their place'.

This overview would be incomplete if we omitted to mention three works which appeared at the beginning of the century and which seem to us to herald the rise of modern criticism: *L'intoleránce religieuse et la politique* (Flammarion, 1911), by Bouché-Leclercq; *La propagande chréthienne et les persecutions* (Payot, 1915), by Henri-F. Secrétan, and *Le christianisme antique* (Flammarion, 1921) by Charles Guignebert.

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Christianity, 'an Eastern religion by its origins and fundamental characteristics' (Guignebert), infiltrated ancient Europe almost surreptitiously. The Roman Empire, tolerant by nature, paid no attention to it for a long time. In Suetonius' *Life of the Twelve Caesars*, we read of an act of Claudius: 'He expelled from Rome the Jews, who were in continual ferment at the instigation of a certain Chrestos'. On the whole, the Greco-Latin world remained at first closed to preaching. The praise of weakness, poverty, and 'madness', seemed to them foolish. Consequently, the first centres of Christian propaganda were set up in Antioch, Ephesus, Thessalonica and Corinth. It was in these great cities, where slaves, artisans and immigrants mingled with merchants, where everything was bought and sold, and where preachers and enlightened men, in ever-increasing numbers, vied to seduce motley and restless crowds, that the first apostles found fertile ground.

Causse, who was a professor at the Protestant theology faculty of the University of Strasbourg, writes: 'If the apostles preached the Gospel in the village squares, it was not only because of a wise missionary policy, but because the new religion was more favourably received in these new surroundings than by the old races attached to their past and their soil. The true Greeks were to remain alien and hostile to Christianity for a long time. The Athenians had greeted Paul with ironical indifference: "You will tell us another day!" it was to be many years before the old Romans would abandon their aristocratic contempt for that detestable superstition. The early Church of Rome was very little Latin, and Greek was scarcely spoken in it. But the Syrians, the Asiatics and the whole crowd of the *Graeculi* received the Christian message with enthusiasm' (*Essai sur le conflit du christianisme primitif et de la civilisation*, Ernest Leroux, 1920).

J.B.S. Haldane, who considered fanaticism as one of the 'four truly important inventions made between 3000 B.C. and 1400' (*The Inequality of Man*, Famous Books, New York, 1938), attributed its paternity to Judeo-Christianity. Yahweh, the god of the Arabian deserts, is a lonely and jealous god, exclusive and cruel, who advocates intolerance and hatred. 'Do I not hate those who hate you, O Yahweh, and do I not rage against your enemies? I hate them and regard them as my enemies' (Psalm 139:21 and 22). Jeremiah implores: 'You will give them their due, O LORD, and your curse

will be upon them! You will pursue them in anger and exterminate them from under heaven' (Lamentations, 111, 64-66). 'Surely, O God, you will surely put to death the wicked' (Psalm 139:19). 'And in Your mercy You will dispel my enemies, and destroy all the adversaries of my soul…' (Psalm 143:12). Wisdom, who personifies the infinitely good, threatens: 'I too will laugh at your misfortune, I will mock when your fear comes upon you' (Prov. I, 26). Deuteronomy speaks of the fate that must be reserved for 'idolaters': 'If your brother, your mother´s son, your daughter, or the woman who lies in your bosom, or your friend, who is like yourself, should incite you in secret, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods", whom you do not know…, you shall first kill him; your hand shall be laid upon him first to put him to death, and then the hand of all the people shall be laid upon him. When you hear that in one of the cities which Yahweh grants you to dwell, it is said that unworthy men have arisen who have seduced their fellow citizens, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods!" which you do not know, you shall inquire, and if you see that such an abomination is true, you shall smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword; you shall consecrate it to extermination, as well as all that is in it. You shall gather all its spoil amid its streets, and burn the city and all its prey in the fire to the honour of the LORD your God. Thus it shall become a perpetual heap of ruins, and shall not be rebuilt…' (Deut. XIII).

In the Gospel, Jesus says, when they come to arrest him: '…for all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (Matthew XXVI, 52). But before that he had said: 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man´s enemies will be those of his household' (Matthew X, 34-36). He also pronounced the phrase that is the motto of all totalitarianism: 'He who is not with me is against me' (Matthew XII, 30).

The early Church will scrupulously apply such slogans. Unbelievers and pagans are subhumans in the eyes of the apostles. St. Peter compares them to 'irrational animals, born to be taken and destroyed' (2 Peter II, 12). Jerome advised the converted Christian to kick the body of his mother if she tried to prevent him from leaving her forever to follow the teachings of Christ. In 345, Fermicus Maternus made slaughter a duty: 'The law forbids, most holy emperors, to spare either son or brother. It forces us to punish the woman we love tenderly and to plunge the iron into her breast. It puts weapons in our hands and orders us to turn them against our closest friends…'

From then on, the evangelical practice of charity will be strictly subordinated to the degree of adherence to mysteries and dogmas. Europe will be evangelized by iron and fire. Heretics, schismatics, freethinkers and pagans will be, renewing the gesture of Pontius Pilate, handed over to the secular arm to be subjected to torture and death. Denunciation will be rewarded with the attribution of the property of the victims and their families. Those who, 'having understood the judgment of God,' wrote St. Paul, 'are worthy of death' (Romans, I, 32). Thomas Aquinas specifies: 'The heretic must be burned.' One of the canons adopted at the Lateran Council declares: 'They are not

murderers who kill heretics' (*Homicidas non esse qui heretici trucidant*). By the bull *Ad extirpenda*, the Church will authorize torture. And, in 1864, Pius IX proclaimed in the *Syllabus*: 'Anathema be he who says that the Church has no right to use force, that it has no direct or indirect temporal power' (XXIV).

Voltaire, who knew how to add up, had counted the victims of religious intolerance from the beginnings of Christianity to his time. Taking into account exaggerations and making a large allowance for the benefit of the doubt, he found a total of 9,718,000 people who had lost their lives *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. Compared to this figure, the number of Christians killed in Rome under the sign of the palm (a symbol of martyrdom and glorious resurrection in early Christianity) seems insignificant.

'Gibbon believes he can affirm' —writes Louis Rougier— 'that the number of martyrs throughout the entire Roman Empire, over three centuries, did not reach that of Protestants executed in a single reign and exclusively in the provinces of the Netherlands, where, according to Grotius, more than one hundred thousand subjects of Charles V died at the hands of the executioner. However conjectural these calculations may be, it can be said that the number of Christian martyrs is small compared with the victims of the Church during the fifteen centuries: the destruction of paganism under the Christian emperors, the fight against the Arians, the Donatists, the Nestorians, the Monophysites, the Iconoclasts, the Manicheans, the Cathars and the Albigensians, the Spanish Inquisition, the wars of religion, the dragonads of Louis XIV, pogroms of the Jews… Faced with such excesses, we can ask ourselves, with Bouché-Leclercq, 'whether the benefits of Christianity (however great) have not been more than compensated for by the religious intolerance which it borrowed from Judaism to spread throughout the world'… (*Celse contre les chrétiens*, Copernic, 1977).

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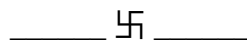
The ancients believed in the unity of the world, in the dialectical intimacy of man with nature. Their natural philosophy was dominated by the ideas of *becoming* and *alternation*. The Greeks equated ethics with aesthetics, the *kalôn* with the *agathôn*, the good with beauty, and Renan rightly wrote: 'A system in which the Venus de Milo is only an idol is a false system, or at least a partial one, because beauty is worth almost as much as goodness and truth. With such ideas, a decline in art is inevitable.' (*Les apôtres*, p. 372). The 'new man' of Christianity professed a very different vision of things. He carried within himself a conflict, not the everyday one that forms the fabric of life, but an eschatological, absolute conflict: the divorce from the world.

Early Christianity extends the messianic idea present in Judaism in an exacerbated form, due to a millennial expectation. In the words attributed to Jesus we

find literal quotations from the visions of the *Book of Enoch*. For the first Christians, the world, a mere stage, a vale of tears, a place of unbearable difficulties and tensions, needed *compensation*, a radiant vision that would *justify*(morally speaking) the impotence of here below. That is why the earth appears as the field on which the forces of Evil and Good, the prince of this world and the heavenly Father, those possessed by the devil and the sons of God, confront each other: 'And this is the victory that has overcome the world: our faith' (I John V, 4). The idea that the world belongs to Evil, later characteristic of certain Gnostics (the Manicheans), appears frequently in the first writings of Christianity. Jesus himself affirmed: 'I do not pray for the world…, as I am not of the world' (John XVII, 9-14). St. John insists: 'Do not love the world, nor the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world.' (I John II, 15-16.) 'Do not be surprised if the world hates you.' (Ibid. III,13). 'We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.' (Ibid. V, 19.) Later, the Rule of St. Benedict will state as a precept that monks must 'make themselves strangers to the things of the world' (*A saeculi actius se facere alienum*). In the *Imitation of Christ* we read: 'The truly wise man is he who, in order to gain Christ, considers all the things of the earth as rubbish and dung.' (I, 3, 5).

In the midst of the great artistic and literary renaissance of the first two centuries, Christians, as outsiders who pleased to be so, remained indifferent or, more often, hostile. Biblical aesthetics rejected the representation of forms, the harmony of lines and volumes; consequently, they had only a disdainful look on the statues that adorned squares and monuments. For the rest, everything was an object of hatred. The colonnades of temples and covered walks, the gardens with their fountains and domestic altars where a sacred flame flickered, the rich mansions, the uniforms of the legions, the villas, the ships, the roads, the works, the conquests, the ideas: everywhere the Christian saw the mark of the Beast. The Fathers of the Church condemned not only luxury, but also any profane work of art, colourful clothing, musical instruments, white bread, foreign wines, feather pillows (had not Jacob rested his head on a stone?) and even the custom of cutting one's beard, in which Tertullian sees 'a lie against one´s own face' and an impious attempt to improve the work of the Creator.

The rejection of the world became even more radical among the early Christians because they were convinced that the Parousia (the return of Jesus Christ at the end of time) was going to take place immediately. It was Jesus himself who had promised it to them: 'Assuredly, I say to you, some who are standing here will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.' (Matthew XVI, 28). 'Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.' (Matthew XXIV, 34). In view of this, they repeated the good news more and more. But the end of all things is at hand (I Peter IV, 7). 'It is the last time' (I John II, 18). Paul returns again and again to this idea. To the Hebrews: 'Therefore cast not away your confidence,

which has great reward… For yet a little while, and He that shall come will come, and will not delay' (Hebrews X, 35-37). 'Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together… but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching' (Ibid., X, 25). To the Thessalonians: 'Stand firm, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.' To the Corinthians: 'Brothers, the time is short; therefore let those who have wives be as though they had none…' (I Cor. VII, 29). To the Philippians: 'The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything…' (Phil. IV, 5 and 6).

In his dialogue with Trypho, Justin affirms that Christians will soon be gathered in Jerusalem, and that it will be for a thousand years (LXXX – LXXXII). In the second century, the Phrygian Montanus declares that he foresees the imminence of the end of the world. In Pontus, Christian peasants abandon their fields to await the day of judgment. Tertullian prays *pro mora fines*, 'that the end may be delayed.' But time passed and nothing happened. Generations disappeared, one after another, without having seen the glorious advent; and faced with the continual delay of its eschatological hopes, the Church, giving proof of prudence, ended by resigning itself to placing the Parousia in an undetermined 'beyond.' Today only Jehovah's Witnesses repeat on a fixed date: 'Next year in the Jerusalem of heaven.'

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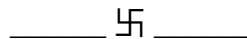
Christian doctrine was a *social revolution*. It did not affirm for the first time that the soul existed (which would not have made it original), but that everyone had one identical at birth. The men of ancient culture, who were born into a religion because they were born into a *fatherland*, tended instead to think that by adopting a behaviour characterised by rigour and self-control they might succeed in forging a soul, but that this was a fate reserved undoubtedly for the *best*. The idea that *all men* could be gratified with it indifferently and simply by the fact of existing was shocking to them. On the contrary, Christianity maintained that everyone was born with a soul, which was equivalent to saying that men were born equal before God.

On the other hand, in its rejection of the world, Christianity presented itself as the heir of an old biblical tradition of hatred of the powerful, of the systematic exaltation of the 'humble and the poor' (*anavim ébionim*), whose triumph *and revenge* over wicked and proud civilizations had been announced by prophets and psalmists. In the *Book of Enoch*, widely disseminated in the first century in Christian circles (cited in the epistles of Jude XV, 4, and of Barnabas: XV), we read: 'The Son of Man will raise kings and the powerful from their beds and the strong from their seats; he will break their strength… He will overthrow kings from their thrones and their power. He will make the mighty turn their faces away, and cover them with shame…' (Enoch XLVI, 4-6).

Jeremiah takes pleasure in imagining the future victims in the form of animals for the slaughter: 'Separate them, O Yahweh, like sheep for the slaughter, and reserve them for the day of slaughter' (Jeremiah XII, 3). To the women of the powerful, whom he calls 'cows of Bashan' (Amos IV, I), Amos predicts: 'Yahweh has sworn by his holiness: The days will come upon you when you will be lifted with hooks, and your descendants with fishing spears' (IV, 2). The psalms outline the beginning of the class struggle, and the same spirit will inspire 'the first groups of Christians and later the monastic orders' (A. Causse, op. cit.). 'In the end, there is only one theme in the Psalms,' says Isidore Loeb, 'which is the struggle of the poor against the wicked, and his final triumph thanks to the protection of God, who loves the one and hates the other' (*Littérature des pauvres dans la Bible*).

The poor are *always* the victims of injustice. They are called the Humble, the Holy, the Just and the Pious. They are unfortunate, prey to all evils; they are sick, invalid, alone, abandoned, relegated to a valley of tears, they water their bread with tears, etc. But they bear their pain; they even seek it out because they know that such trials are *necessary* for their salvation, that the more they are humiliated, the more they will triumph, the more they suffer, the more they will one day see others suffer. As for the wicked, they are rich, and their wealth is *always* culpable.

They are happy, build cities, perform pre-eminent social functions, and command armies, but they will one day be *punished* in proportion as they dominate. 'Such is the social ideal of Jewish prophecy,' says Gerard Walter, 'a kind of general levelling which will make all class distinctions disappear and lead to the creation of a uniform society from which all privileges of any kind will be banished. This egalitarian sentiment, carried to its ultimate limits, is linked to an irreducible animosity against the rich and the powerful, who will not be admitted into the future kingdom. The ideal humanity of the announced times will include all the just without distinction of creed or nationality' (*Les origines du communisme*, Payot, 1931).

The second book of the *Sibylline Oracles* paints a picture of humankind regenerating in a new Jerusalem under a strictly communist regime: 'And the land will be common to all; there will be no more walls or frontiers. All will live in common and wealth will be useless. Then there will be no more poor or rich, no tyrants or slaves, no great or small, no kings or lords, but all will be equal' (*Or. Sib.* II, 320-326).
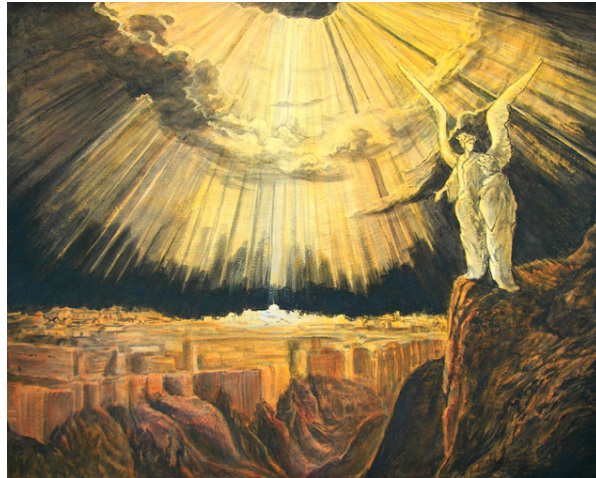
Given this, it is easier to understand why Christianity initially seemed to the ancients to be a religion of slaves and *heimatlos*, a vehicle for a kind of 'counterculture' that only achieved success among the dissatisfied, the declassed, the envious and the revolutionaries *avant la lettre:* slaves, artisans, fullers, carders, shoemakers, single women, etc. Celsus describes the first Christian communities as 'a mass of ignorant people and gullible women, recruited from the dregs of the people,' and his adversaries hardly try to disabuse him on this point. Lactantius preaches equality in social conditions: 'There is no equity where there is no equality' (*Inst.* VII, 2). Under Heliogabalus, Calixtus, bishop of Rome, recommends that converts marry slaves.

For this reason, there is no idea more odious to the Christian than that of the *fatherland:* how can one serve both the land of one's fathers and the Father who is in heaven? Salvation does not depend on birth, belonging to a city, or the seniority of one's lineage but exclusively on respect for dogmas. From then on, it is enough to distinguish believers from unbelievers, and all other boundaries must disappear. Paul insists on this: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female…' Hermas, who enjoyed great authority in Rome, condemns the converts to perpetual exile: 'You servants of God live in a foreign land. Your city is very far from this one' (*Sim.* I, I).

Such a disposition of spirit explains the Roman reaction. Celsus, a patriot concerned about the health of the State, who sensed the weakening of the *Imperium* and the decline of civic feeling that the triumph of Christian egalitarianism could provoke, begins his *True Discourse* with these words: 'A new race of men born yesterday, without homeland or traditions, united against all religious and civil institutions, persecuted by

justice, accused of infamy by all and who glory in this common execration: that is what Christians are. Factious men who pretend to make a separate ranch and separate themselves from common society.' And Tacitus, who says that they were detested for their 'abominations' (*flagitia*), accuses them of the crime of 'hatred of the human race.' 'As soon as it was suppressed,' he says, 'this execrable superstition was once again breaking out not only in Judea, the cradle of the plague, but in Rome itself, where all the horrors and infamies that exist flow from all sides and are believed…'

The *imperial principle* is at this time the instrument of a conception of the world carried out as a vast project. Thanks to it, the *Pax Romana* reigns in an ordered world. Filled with admiration, Horace exclaims: 'The ox wanders safely through the fields fertile by Ceres and Abundance, while sailors everywhere plogh the peaceful seas.' In Halicarnassus, a tripartite inscription in honour of Augustus proclaims: 'Cities flourish amid order, concord and wealth.' But for the early Christians the pagan State is the work of Satan. The Empire, the supreme symbol of a proud force, is nothing but arrogance worthy of ridicule. The harmonious Roman society is declared without exception *guilty*, for its resistance to monotheistic demands, traditions and way of life, are so many offences against the laws of heavenly socialism. And as guilty, it must be punished; that is, destroyed. Like a lengthy complaint, the Christian literature of the first two centuries breathes out its rosary of anathemas. With feverish impatience the apostles preach the 'hour of vengeance,' 'so that all things which are written may be fulfilled' (Luke XXI, 22). As the Fathers of the Church did after them, they announce the imminence of revenge, of the 'great night' when everything will be turned upside down. The Epistle of James contains a call to class struggle: 'Come now, you rich people! Weep and howl for the misery that will come upon you. Your riches are corrupted and your clothes are moth-eaten' (V,1-2).

James, who has read the *Book of Enoch*, predicts terrible tortures for the rich and the pagans. He imagines the final judgment as a 'knock to the throat,' 'a kind of immense slaughterhouse to which thousands of the well-off, fat and splendid, and with all their wealth on them, will be dragged. He is joy at seeing them go one by one, returning their ill-gotten gains before feeding with their fat the formidable carnage he glimpses in his dreams' (Gérard Walter, op. cit.). Above all, he accuses the rich of deicide: 'You condemned and killed the Just One.' (V, 6.) This thesis, which makes Jesus the victim, not of a people, but of a class, will soon become popular. Tertullian writes: 'The time is ripe for Rome to end up in flames. She will receive the reward her works deserve' (*On Prayer*, 5).

The *Book of Daniel*, written between 167 and 165 b.c.e., and the *Book of Revelation* are the two great sources from which this holy fury draws. St. Hippolytus (c. 170-235), in his *Commentary on Daniel*, places the end of Rome around the year 500 and attributes it to the rise of democracies: 'The toes of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream represent the coming democracies, which will separate from each other like the ten toes of the statue, in which iron will be mixed with clay.' Around 407, St. Jerome,

in another *Commentary on Daniel*, defines the end of the world as 'the time when the kingdom of the Romans will be destroyed.' Other authors repeat these prophecies: Eusebius, Apollinaris and Methodius of Olympus. The revolutionary ardour against Rome, the 'accursed city,' 'new Babylon,' and 'great harlot' knows no bounds. The city is the last avatar of Leviathan and Behemoth.

In all these apocalypses, sibylline mysteries and double-meaning prophecies, in all this mental trepidation, hypersensitive to 'symbols' and 'signs,' in all this psalm-like literature, we find more imprecations than would have been necessary to warm the spirits, shake the imaginations and even arm still hesitant hands. This explains the accusations that followed the burning of Rome in the year 64.

Deuteronomy ordered the services of God to slaughter unbelieving populations and burn their cities in honour of Yahweh, and Jesus repeated the image: 'He who does not abide in me will be thrown out like a branch that withers, and is gathered and thrown into the fire and is burned' (John XV, 6). And indeed, from Rome to the bonfires of the Inquisition, much will burn. Sacred pyromania will be exercised without respite. 'This idea (that the world of the impious will be destroyed by fire),' says Bouché-Leclercq, 'had been received by Christians from Jewish seers, from those prophets and sibilants who invoked lightning as quickly as a torch, iron as quickly as fire on the cities and peoples hostile to Israel. Never has the imagination burned so much as in the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel, the richest collection of anathemas that religious literature has ever produced.'

'In this opinion of a general fire,' adds Gibbon, 'the faith of Christians came to coincide with the Eastern tradition… The Christian, who based his belief not so much on the fallacious arguments of reason as on the authority of tradition and the interpretation of Scripture, awaited the event with terror and confidence, was sure of its ineluctable imminence. As this solemn idea permanently occupied his mind, he regarded all the disasters that befell the Empire as so many infallible symptoms of the agony of the world.

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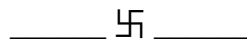
This certainty that the Empire needed to collapse for the Kingdom to come explains the mixed feelings of the early Christians towards the barbarians. Undoubtedly, at first, they felt as threatened as the Romans.

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, distinguished between external enemies (*hostes extranei*) and internal enemies (*hostes domestici*). For him, it was the Goths that Ezekiel was referring to when he spoke of the people of Magog. But, in the second stage, these barbarians, who were soon to be evangelised, became auxiliaries of divine justice. Christians could not admit that their fate was linked to that of a 'Babylon of impudence'.

That is why the *Carmen de Providentia* or the *Commonitorium* of Orentius are scarcely interested in other than the 'enemies within.' In the 3rd century, in his *Carmen apologeticum*, a Christian author, Comodian, speaks of the Germans (more precisely of the Goths) as 'executors of God´s designs.' In the following century, Orosius, in turn, affirms that the barbarian invasions are 'God´s judgement' that come 'in punishment for the faults of the Romans' (*poenaliter accidisse*). It is the equivalent of the 'plagues' Moses used to blame the Pharaoh.

On 24 August 410, Alaric, king of the Visigoths, after besieging Rome for several weeks, entered the city by night through the *Porta Salaria*. It was a converse patrician, Proba Faltonia, of the Anician family, who, after sending her slaves to occupy the gate, had it surrendered to the enemy. The Visigoths were Christians, and the spiritual and ideological solidarity bore fruit. The Anicians, of whom Amianus Marcellinus (XVI, 8) says that they were reputed to be insatiable, were known as fanatics of the Catholic party. The sack of Rome that followed was described by Christian authors with kindly strokes. Alaric's 'clemency' was praised. Georges Sorel asked: 'Were the vanquished guilty?' St Augustine says of the Visigothic leader, he was God's envoy and the avenger of Christianity. Oretius says that only one senator died and that it was his fault ('he had not made himself known'), and that it was enough for Christians to make the sign of the cross be respected, and so on. 'Such daring lies, says Augustin Thierry, were later admitted as indisputable facts' (*Alaric*).

Around 442, Quodvulteus, bishop of Carthage, claimed that the ravages of the Vandals were pure justice. In one of his sermons, he tried to console a faithful member who had complained about the devastation: 'Yes, you tell me that the barbarian has taken everything from you… I see, I understand, I meditate: you, who lived in the sea,

have been devoured by a bigger fish. Wait a little: an even bigger fish will come and devour the one who devours, despoil the one who despoils, take the one who takes… This plague that we are suffering today will not last forever: in truth, it is in the hands of the Almighty'. Finally, at the end of the 5th century, Salvianus of Marseilles affirms that 'the Romans have suffered their sorrows by the just judgement of God'.

In the 2nd century, the City had been invaded by foreign cults. A temple to the Great Mother had been erected on the Palatine Hill, where *fanatici* officiated. Moral contagion did the rest. 'Through the gap opened in the barrier that closes the horizon of terrestrial life, they were going to penetrate all sorts of chimaeras and superstitions, drawn from the inexhaustible reservoir of the Oriental imagination.' (Bouché-Leclercq). These were the bacchanalia, the rites with mysteries, the Isiac cult, the cult of Mithra, and finally, Christianity. The words 'The last of his family' were written in the tombs more frequently. Pompey's line had disappeared in the 2nd century, and also Augustus' and Maecenas' lines.

Rome was no longer Rome; all the rivers of the East flowed into the Tiber. It was only much later, in the Renaissance, that Petrarch (1304-1374) observed that the 'black epoch' (*tenebrae*) of Roman history had coincided with the era of Theodosius and Constantine; while in northern Europe, in the early 16th century, Erasmus (c. 1469-1536) claimed, although he called himself a 'militiaman of Christ', that the true barbarians of ancient times, the 'real Goths', had been the monks and scholastics of the Middle Ages.

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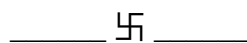
In his essay on *The End of the Ancient World* (op. cit.), Saint Mazarin rightly recalls that, until recently, the culture of the Late Empire has always seemed to us '*qualitatively* inferior to that of the great civilisations that preceded it'. But today, he says, this is no longer the case: 'All the voices of the "decadent" Roman world, between the 3rd and 6th centuries, have become accessible to us'. Conversely, 'we can say that decadentism, expressionism and other modern categories of literary or artistic criticism are so many ways of understanding the world of the Late Empire… The kinship between our age and that world is a fact on which everyone can agree'. And he finally asks: 'To what extent can we extend this revaluation of the poetry and art of the Late Empire to manifestations of social and political order?'

Curiously, Mazarino, for whom we probably live in the best of all possible worlds, draws from this observation the moral that the idea of decadence is illusory. At no point does he think that if the Late Empire seems more worthy of appreciation to our contemporaries, it is because they find stigmata familiar to them in it. After all, the current period refers like no other to the image of the *tenebrae* that Erasmus spoke of, and it is this similarity that has put us in a position to appreciate what previous generations, in better health, could not see.

Indeed, studying the conditions in which the Roman Empire died is not only of historical and abstract interest. The kinship between the two conjunctures, the parallel often drawn between those conditions and those that prevail today, makes it profoundly relevant. Moreover, many admit, with Louis Rougier, that 'revolutionary ideology, socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, derive from the pauperism of the prophets of Israel. In the criticism of the abuses of the old regime by the orators of the Revolution, in the prosecution of the capitalist regime by the communists of our days, the echo of the furious diatribes of Amos and Hosea against the course of a world in which the insolence of the rich oppresses and flays the poor resounds; as do the harsh invectives of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature against imperial Rome' (op. cit.).

Celsus would not find it challenging to identify even today 'a new race of men, born yesterday, without a country or traditions…, united against all institutions… and glory in common execration.' Once again, in the Western world, the *fanatici*, sometimes living 'in community,' truly stateless, hostile to all ordered structures, to all science, hierarchy and borders, to all selection, separate themselves from the world and denounce the 'Babylon' of modern times. Just as the first Christian communities proclaimed the abolition of all natural categories for the exclusive benefit of the *ecclesia* of believers, today, a neo-Christianity *[Editor's emphasis]* is spreading, which announces the imminent advent of a new Parousia, of an egalitarian world *unified* by the overcoming of 'old quarrels,' the socialisation of Love and the flight forward in the delay of the 'social.' On December 30, 1973, Brother Roger Schutz, Prior of Taizé, declared: 'Above all, there must be Love, because it is Love that gives us unity.'

Ancient Christianity rejected the world. The Church of classical times distinguished the order above from that of here below. Neo-Christianity boldly transferring its secular hopes from heaven to 'here below', secularises its theodicy. It no longer celebrates the solemn marriage of converts with the mystical Bridegroom but the marriage of Christ and humanity through the intercession of the universal Spirit of socialism. It too rejects the world, but only the *present one*, affirming that it can be 'changed,' that another must succeed it, and that the messianic union of the 'disadvantaged' can, through its intelligent intervention, *fulfil* on earth the old dream of the biblical prophets: to stop history and make injustices, inequalities and tensions disappear.

'Today more than ever, the Greek Spirit, transformed into a *scientific spirit*, and the *messianic spirit* transformed into a *revolutionary spirit*, are irreconcilably opposed. The existence of cold-blooded sectarians and fanatics to whom subjective participation in a body of revealed truths, in gnosis, gives, in their own eyes, rights over everything and everyone, the right to do everything and to allow themselves everything, persists in posing a *question of life or death* to a society that is on the verge, not of a war of religion, but of something close to that historical plague: the war of civilisation' (Jules Monnerot, *Sociology of the Revolution*, Fayard, 1969).

Certain critics repeat against European civilisation and culture the words of Orosius and Tertullian against Rome: today's setbacks are the *punishment* for its past faults. It *pays* for its 'pride', wealth, power, and conquests. The barbarians who come to plunder it will make it *atone* for the sufferings of the Third World, the impotent ambition and the humiliation of the poorly endowed. On its ruins, the Jerusalem of the new times will be built. Then, we will see the disappearance of 'the veil of mourning that veiled all peoples, the shroud that covered all nations' (Isaiah XXV, 7). We are once again faced with the same *moralising* interpretation of history. But neither history nor the world is *governed* by morality.

The world is mute: it gravitates in silence. In his essay on *The Jewish Question*, Marx stated that only communism could 'fulfil in a profane way the human foundation of Christianity', thus pointing out the 'revolutionary inadequacies' of Christian doctrine ('religion of the slaves, but not a revolution of the slaves') and the affinities between the two prophetic systems, the spiritual and the terrestrial. Roger Garaudy clarifies these words by recalling that Christianity was 'an element that disintegrated Roman power'. He adds:

> The hostility to the imperial cult, the refusal to participate in it, and even more so the prohibition of Christians from serving militarily in the Empire at a time when recruitment was becoming increasingly difficult and when the number of Christians was increasing daily, a prohibition which persisted until the 4th century, had a clear revolutionary meaning. Moreover, there is in the character of Christ, magnified by the collective imagination of the first Christians, and heir of numerous messiahs similar to the Essene 'Lord of Justice', an undeniable revolutionary aspect (*Marxisme du XXe siecle*, La Palatine, 1966).

Engels, who reminds us that 'like all great revolutionary movements, Christianity was the work of the popular masses,' also noted the kinship between the two doctrines: the same messianic certainty, the same eschatological hope, the same conception of truth (well perceived by O. Tillich).

In early Christianity, he sees 'a completely new phase of religious evolution, destined to become one of the most revolutionary elements in the history of the human spirit' (*Contribution a l'histoire du christianisme primitif*, in Marx and Engels, *Sur la religion*, selection of texts, Ed. Sociales, 1960). And in his eyes, Christianity is the non-plus ultra of religion, the 'consummation' (in the sense of *Aufhebung*) of all the religions that preceded it. Having become the 'first possible universal religion' (Engels, *Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity*) it is also, by the force of things, the last: every end marks a caesura, which implies *another* beginning. After Christianity, assuming that there is an 'after,' there can only come its *overcoming*.

Joseph de Maistre said: 'The Gospel outside the Church is a poison,' and Father Daniélou: 'If we separate the Gospel from the Church, it loses its temper.' These words have their whole meaning today, when the Church, the new catoblepas[4], seems to want to abolish its *history* and return to its origins. Throughout the two millennia, structures of order were established within the Church which, while adapting to the *European* mentality, allowed it to put into form and reason the dangerous evangelical message; the 'poison' having been softened, the faithful had become Mithridatic.

Today, neo-Christianity wants to put these two millennia in parentheses to return to the *sources* of a genuinely universal religion and give a more significant impact to its message. So, if it is true that we are living through the 'end' of the Church (not, indeed, of the Gospel), this *end* takes the form of a return to a *beginning*. The Gospel (pastoral ministry) increasingly separates itself from the Church (dogmatics). But this is simply a *repetition:* the tendency is to bring Catholics back to the 'revolutionary' conditions in and through which early Christianity was created. Hence, the interest of this historical overview which, while showing us what happened, tells us at the same time what awaits us.

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Translated for *The West's Darkest Hour*

(January 2025)

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[4] The animal of which Pliny the Elder speaks, slow and stupid in appearance and which killed with its gaze (*Translator's note*).