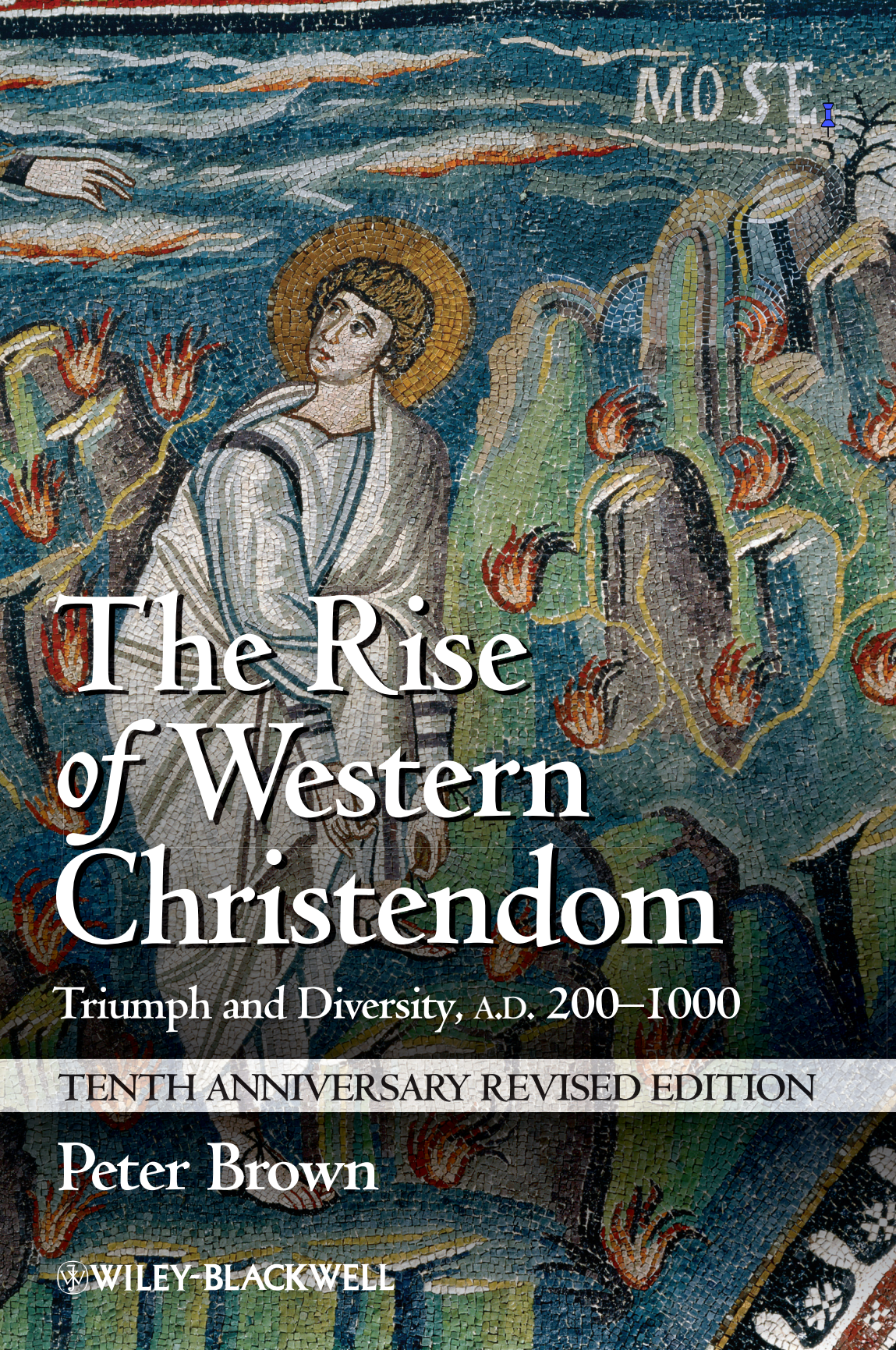

The Rise of Western Christendom

Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000

TENTH ANNIVERSARY REVISED EDITION

Peter Brown

WILEY-BLACKWELL

The Rise of Western Christendom

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For Betsy

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Preface to the Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition

This book is a reprint of a book with a history. It is a history of curiosity and of growing excitement. I first wrote it in the form of a relatively short essay (virtually without footnotes) which appeared in 1996 as part of the series *Faire l'Europe: The Making of Europe*, directed by Jacques le Goff.

Over the next few years, however, I realized that I could hear behind me the roar of a dam burst. A remarkable surge of publications, of new discoveries and of new and daring perspectives was under way. It ensured that the centuries associated with the end of the Roman empire and the first centuries of the western Middle Ages (between 200 and 1000 A.D.) – previously dismissed as the "Dark" Ages – looked very different from how they had done before. New views had emerged, lively controversies had arisen concerning the rise of Christianity, the fall of the Roman empire, the origin and expansion of Islam, the conversion to Christianity of northern Europe and the establishment of the empire of Charlemagne. I needed to dive back into the flood and bring these changes in modern scholarship to the attention of readers in an expanded account. This was fully equipped with footnotes and bibliography, so that they also could dive in and join in the fun.

Hence what was called a Second Edition of the book appeared in 2002. It was considerably more than a mere re-edition. The title apart, it was a new book. But the surge in scholarship has continued unabated. It is only proper to pause once again to take breath. In this preface, I will sum up some recent arguments and make available, from the continued, mighty flood of publications, an inevitably short selection of recent works. I hope that readers will find these works helpful to continue the exploration of what has remained a hotly debated period. I do this so as to encourage readers to wander even more widely in this rapidly evolving and creative field. There

they will find many other outstanding works to which, for reasons of space alone, I was not able to refer.

A Wider Setting

First let me remind readers of the shape of the book. It is not a conventional book about Europe, or even about the history of Christianity. I have deliberately set my narrative against a far wider geographical background than that of most accounts. From the very first pages, we meet figures set against a landscape that embraces the whole of Eurasia and northern Africa, from Ireland to China and from the estuary of the Rhine (and, eventually, from Iceland) to the southern end of the Red Sea.

There are good reasons for having done this. For a historian of the ancient world in its last centuries, it is essential to place what we now call western Europe on the map. In the year 200 A.D., western Europe was barely perceptible as a distinct region. The Roman West was made up of a series of concentric rings. Its economic center of gravity lay far to the south – in north Africa and in southern Italy. The Mediterranean coastline of Spain and southern France was dotted with settlements that went back to the days of the ancient Greeks and the Carthaginians. By contrast, the lands further north – most of what we now call "western Europe": northern France, Belgium, Britain, the Rhineland, Switzerland, Austria, and Hungary – were still relatively raw territories, recently absorbed into the Roman order. Outside these concentric rings lay a further ring, made up, according to the Roman imagination, of feral persons – the "barbarians." Altogether, compared with the ancient empires that had grown up around the Mediterranean, in Egypt, in Mesopotamia, and on the Iranian plateau, what we now call "western Europe" was a small and marginal region. It lay far to the northwest of the ancient heartlands of civilization.

The View from Eurasia

The Roman empire around the Mediterranean in the West and the Persian empire between Mesopotamia and Central Asia in the East saw themselves as the "Two Eyes of the Earth."[1] Their continued conflict for the control of the Middle East was the only true world war of this period. In sheer mass and destructiveness, the repeated confrontations of Roman and Persian armies made what Europeans call "the barbarian invasions" appear like mere gang wars.[2] Yet, seen from the vast steppelands of Eurasia and the hot

deserts of Arabia and the Sahara even Rome and Persia seemed small. For Persians and Romans alike, the swathe of grazing land inhabited by nomad pastoralists, which swept in an almost unbroken stretch from the plains of eastern Hungary to the northern edge of China, remained a looming presence. These nomads were regarded as the immemorial antithesis to civilization. They were the Ultimate Barbarians – the barbarians *par excellence*. Occasionally they made their presence felt. For a short time (as we shall see), the nomadic empire of Attila bullied the Roman empire and struck fear into the Germanic tribes around the Roman frontiers. The book of Christopher Kelly has taken us into the court of Attila.[3] The work of Peter Heather has traced the destabilizing effect of the Hunnish empire on the settled populations of the Danube and of Germany.[4]

The Horizons of the Silk Road

What is less often realized is that the nomad confederacies of the Eurasian steppes acted as Europe's relay system along the long road to China. What we call the Silk Road was never a simple, commercial highway, the ancient equivalent of the Trans-Siberian railway. Instead, goods passed along it in the form of diplomatic interchanges between the great powers – between the empires of Rome, Persia, and China. The stepping stones on this long route were nomadic kingdoms which patrolled the routes and which absorbed the caravan cities of Central Asia and western China.[5]

Throughout this period (as we shall see, especially in chapters 1, 12, and 13), the material and cultural goods that crossed Eurasia included new religions. The Silk Road was dotted with communities of Christians. Their libraries and churches abutted Buddhist stupas in the middle of great caravan cities. Much of what we know about the beliefs and worldview of the Manichees (a radical sect of largely Christian origin) comes from manuscripts excavated in the oases of the Turpan Depression of western China. Western tourists who nowadays walk around the great adobe ruins of Gaocheng outside modern Turpan realize, with a slight shiver of surprise, that here, in the midst of the Taklamakan desert, Manichaeism – once the most loathed and systematically persecuted of Christian heresies in the Roman empire, whose radical and exotic doctrines had fascinated the young Augustine in fourth-century Carthage – was alive and well and, indeed, a state religion in the Uyghur, Turkish kingdom of Turpan at a time when Charlemagne ruled in the West.[6]

The mobility of Manichaeism and of other forms of Christianity along the Silk Road is a reminder that, for Eurasia as a whole, late antiquity and

the early Middle Ages were not a period characterized by insuperable boundaries. Goods, ideas, and persons traveled slowly but surely over huge distances. They crossed ancient political frontiers. They moved with ease across the seemingly unbridgeable frontier between the nomad and the settled worlds.

What is a Frontier?

Looked at from the steppe lands of Eurasia, the Roman frontier along the Rhine and Danube was a non-frontier. Both sides of it were green. No stark ecological chasm divided one side from the other, as the settled world was divided from that of the nomads in Inner Asia, Arabia, and the Sahara. Up to 400 A.D., two very different social orders faced each other across the Rhine and the Danube. But they were not social orders based upon unbridgeable and unchangeable differences in ecology, in technology, and even in mindset. For this reason, the contrast between "Romans" and "barbarians" – though it seemed so clear to the imagination of contemporaries – was constantly eroded by the facts of nature. The two groups shared a temperate climate which ensured that both Romans and "barbarians" were settled farmers. Like all great rivers (one thinks of the Rio Grande between Texas and Mexico), the Rhine and the Danube were as much joining places as they were dividing lines.

The Roman answer to this challenge had been to invent an absolute frontier where, in fact, no such frontier (such as that traditionally associated with the contrast between nomads and the settled land) existed. They treated all societies outside the political frontier of Rome as "barbarians." More than this: they consistently described all barbarians as ultimate barbarians. They treated the Germans as if they were no different from the nomads of the Eurasian steppes. They saw them as rootless, as bloodthirsty, as ever ready to "flood" the peaceful lands of the empire with murderous bands.

And why did they do this? A great scholar of Gaul and of the "barbarian" side of the Rhine frontier – John Drinkwater – has recently provided a cogent answer. He argues that emperor, military, and civilian populations alike needed the idea of a "barbarian threat" to justify their own existence. The threat of invasion justified high rates of taxation. It justified the splendid palaces and cities ringed with high walls which overlooked the Rhine and the Danube, from the North Sea to the Black Sea. It gave a *raison d'être* to a powerful and well-paid military class. Above all, it enabled the emperor to stand tall as the defender of civilization. By working on both sides of the frontier,

through the patient analysis of Roman sources checked against the findings of recent archaeology, Drinkwater has concluded that much of this was a bluff:

> The "Guard on the Rhine" [mounted along the Roman side of the frontier], which the imperial establishment sold so successfully to contemporaries and to later historians, was an artifact.[7]

Alas, as Drinkwater points out, the imperial establishment did their job only too well: "Like the ancients, we still seem to need the Germanic bogeyman."[8] Altogether the Roman government had a way of rendering absolute boundaries that were, in reality, extremely permeable. A brilliant and closely argued monograph by the late Yves Modéran has shown this happening also in North Africa. Through careful reading of the texts produced by Roman writers in late antique Africa, he shows how an ideological Iron Curtain came to be erected between Romans and Berbers (known to contemporaries as "Moors"). For much of the time, Romans and the Berbers of the mountainous hinterland of North Africa had coexisted. The Berbers were accustomed to a symbiosis with the Romans of the coast. Most of them had become good Christians. They gathered in churches many of which dated from the days of Saint Augustine. It looked as if joint Romano-Berber kingdoms would take over the Maghreb after the fall of Rome. The union of rough mountaineers with civilian Roman populations was not unlike the fusion of Romans and barbarians which had brought the Franks to power in northern Gaul.

The arrival of the armies of the East Roman emperor Justinian brought all that to an end. Seizing Carthage from the Vandals in 535, the east Roman government adopted, in Africa, the attitudes that had been current in Gaul and elsewhere in the fourth century. The "Moors" (the Berbers) were declared to be beyond the pale. They were treated as "outer barbarians." Latin authors writing in Carthage in the late sixth century wrote of these Berber Christians as if they were in no way different from the wild, pagan nomads of the Sahara. One wonders what the history of the Maghreb would have been like if Justinian had not brought the "Roman" empire, with its all too Roman attitudes to the outside world, back to Carthage, and if an ideological Iron Curtain had not been put in place between the Mediterranean coast of Africa and its wide hinterland. Perhaps – so Modéran speculates – a Berber Clovis might have emerged, as the end product of many generations of quiet symbiosis between Romans and settled "Moors," in that large and distant land which had once been so close to Rome.[9]

Altogether, a wide geographical focus which is prepared to look at both sides of the Roman frontiers helps to keep what we usually call the Age of

the barbarian invasions in perspective. In many parts of the Roman West (and especially in northwest Europe), this period is better described as the age of the re-drawing of notional frontiers after the evaporation of a Grand Illusion – the illusion of an unbridgeable difference between Romans and barbarians which had been fostered along the frontiers of the empire.

Christianity and Europe

But there is a further reason for the unusual geographical spread of this book. It is crucial to do justice to the diversity of the many Christianities of this time. For the entire period from 200 to 1000, Christianity remained predominantly a religion of Asia and of northern Africa. Though well established in parts of the western Mediterranean (and not least in large cities such as Rome and Carthage) Christianity spread slowly throughout the non-Mediterranean West. What we now call a distinctively "European" Christianity was unthinkable in the year 500 A.D. Even the notion of "Europe" itself only took on its modern meaning in around the year 650 A.D. (as we will see at the end of chapter 11). By the year 1000 A.D., what could be called a "European" Christianity had only recently been established, with the conversion of Germany, of parts of Eastern Europe, and of Scandinavia. The drama of the expansion of Christianity into northwestern Europe should not blind us to the fact that, seen from the viewpoint of the older, more deeply rooted Christian populations of North Africa, Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria, the Caucasus, and Mesopotamia, what we call Western Christendom was out on a limb. It was the Christianity of a peripheral zone.

It is important to do justice to this fact. In recent times, many Europeans have wished to insist that Europe is a "Christian" civilization. They claim that the centuries covered in this book are of particular importance. For it was then that the "Christian roots of Europe" were planted. It is not my intention to foster this self-congratulatory myth. A Europe with only "Christian roots" would be a very airless place, even for Christians. One might, indeed, say "particularly for Christians." For, throughout this period, so many Christians wrestled with remarkable creativity with the fact that they lived in a society whose roots were not Christian. We begin, in the early fifth century (at the end of chapter 3), with Augustine of Hippo, as he strove to find a place for the "earthly city" and for the values of this world – of the *saeculum* – in his monumental *City of God*, as the late Robert Markus has shown in a series of lucid and deeply committed studies.[10] We continue (in chapter 14 and again in chapter 20) with the learned men of Ireland and elsewhere, from the seventh century onward, as they faced a world where so

much that was essential to their own position in society was resolutely pre-Christian. The roots of northern societies – Irish, Anglo-Saxon, German, and Scandinavian – reached back into "times of yore," to a prestigious Dream Time before the coming of what the Irish called "the blessed white language" of the Christian Scriptures.

The constant presence of a profane, pre-Christian world, which pushed deep roots into the past and into the hearts of Christian believers, provided the populations of what we now call Europe with an invaluable "structural reserve" – a space for the profane that could be constantly drawn upon.[11] Without the tenacity of its gnarled, pre-Christian roots, modern Europe would have lacked the imaginative and intellectual "roughage" provided by an unresolved tension between the sacred and the profane. A Europe which grew only from "Christian roots" would have been a sadly anemic Europe.

Furthermore, modern insistence on the "Christian roots of Europe" has led to a subtle and dangerous slippage. Only too often, accounts of the Christianization of western Europe are written not as if Europe had "Christian roots," but rather as if Christianity itself had only "European roots." Despite the fact that the principal focus of this book is the slow emergence of a distinctive version of Christianity in western Europe, I trust that the reader will realize that the geographical spread of this book was intended to head the reader off from European chauvinism of this kind. The Greek and Middle Eastern world is present throughout the first four chapters. Chapters 12 and 13 are devoted specifically to the Christianities of the Middle East before and after the rise of Islam. Chapter 17 examines the crisis of Byzantine society in the eighth and ninth centuries, associated with the Iconoclastic Controversy.

What I would like to emphasize in this preface is that to do otherwise – to treat the Christianities of Byzantium, Africa, and Asia as if they formed only a distant and exotic backdrop to an exclusively European story – would be to miss one of the most exciting scholarly opportunities of the last ten years. Progress in the discovery of documents from the past of western Christianity has been slow. Of course, there have been some significant discoveries. In the field best known to me – that of the Africa of Saint Augustine – pleasant surprises continue to happen. More sermons of Augustine have been discovered, to add to those previously discovered and published in the 1990s by François Dolbeau.[12] Many anonymous sermons have been identified as coming from Africa in the fifth and sixth centuries, which adds an exciting new dimension to an African Christianity that is usually overshadowed by the mighty figure of Augustine.[13] As we will see, great strides have been made in interpreting the abundant parchment literature and documentation of the late Merovingian and Carolingian periods.

A New Frontier: the Christianities of the East

But these discoveries pale in comparison with advances in the study of the Christianities of the Middle East. Here a new world has been opened up. Manichaean documents in Coptic continue to be published – not least those found among the houses recently excavated in the Dakhleh Oasis of southern Egypt.[14] An entire Christian culture of remarkable wealth and diversity, attested in Syriac, has come to be studied as never before. Hitherto unknown Syriac manuscripts have come to light. Many of them are preserved in areas (such as Iraq and Syria) where recent events have made the fate of the Christian communities uncertain. What is at stake is the survival of the relics of an ancient Christian culture, directly inherited from the days of late antiquity. Many manuscripts date back to a time when Syriac was one of the most widespread learned languages of Asia.

Many exciting research initiatives have opened up to scholars. For example, those who want to savor the riches of this culture (in the form of digitalized manuscripts, expanded catalogues, constantly updated bibliographies, and detailed topographical studies that reveal an entire forgotten landscape) can now turn to the *Syriac Reference Portal* website directed by Professor David Michelson of Vanderbilt University with the help of an international team of collaborators. The creation of this *Syriac Reference Portal* shows how the field has come to attract growing numbers of scholars, who are anxious to explore an abundance of new evidence, and to propound new perspectives. It represents the opening of a new frontier in Christian studies and in studies of the pre-Islamic and Islamic Middle East.[15]

In light of this abundant evidence, a new generation of young scholars has begun to rewrite the history of Christianity in the Byzantine empire and the Middle East. To take one major example of a change of view, the Monophysite opponents of the council of Chalcedon are no longer seen (as they had been through Greek and Latin eyes) as no more than excitable Orientals who severed themselves from the collective wisdom of the Catholic and Orthodox world so as to retreat into inflexible and peripheral "minority" churches. This has been shown to have been far from the case. As opponents of the Chalcedonian state church of Byzantium, dissident Monophysite churchmen developed a robust sense of Christian community detached from the incubus of empire.[16] The Monophysite dissidence produced great theologians, ascetic heroes, and masters of spirituality.[17]

Nor were these debates confined within the frontiers of the Roman and Sasanian empires. An entire world has emerged, far to the south of the conventional boundaries of Rome and Persia. In Yemen and Ethiopia, the

clash of various forms of Christianity with Judaism created, in the sixth century, a situation of religious war that was conducted with an ideological fury that anticipated the spirit of the Islamic *jihâd* and of the medieval Christian Crusades.[18]

A Common Market of Ideas

Above all, the warring Christian churches of Asia and Africa turned the Middle East into a vast echo chamber, resounding with lively conversations. The literature of every church was characterized by debates with real or imagined rivals,[19] and by lists of questions and answers addressed to the learned by the faithful.[20] Such constant debate and questioning created a common language of thought which embraced all faiths, local languages and regions. It was the cyber-highway of the age. In the sixth and seventh centuries, this common language of thought reached from Alexandria to the Iranian plateau, bridging the frontier between Rome and Persia, to include the entire Middle East in a new common market of ideas.[21]

The men who contributed to this common market cared deeply about education. Based in the city of Nisibis (Nusaybin in modern Turkey), the "Nestorian" Christians of the Church of the East created an entire new system of Christian schooling. News of the distant schools of Nisibis greatly impressed westerners such as Cassiodorus.[22] They also cared about the Greco-Roman past. In the great Monophysite monastery of Qenneshre (The Nest of Eagles), beside the Euphrates, a learned man such as Bishop George of the Arabs could still pass on to his colleagues recondite information on the origin of the name of the river Tiber. This was in the 720s, that is, in the last days of the Merovingian dynasty in Gaul and nearly a hundred years after the Muslim conquest of the Middle East.[23]

The Entry of Islam

This brings us to Islam. And, when it comes to Islam, as we all know, modern attitudes have changed dramatically in the last ten years or so. The reader should know that chapter 13, on the Christian communities under Islamic rule, was prepared and written before the tragic events of September 11, 2001. These events and the wars and state of alarm which have followed them have brought Islam to the forefront of the concerns of Europeans and Americans alike.

Inevitably, these terrible events created a fraught situation, characterized by the revival of ancient prejudices and by urgent demands for quick answers. Yet the scholarship of the last ten years has been marked by remarkable and dispassionate advances in our understanding of the first centuries of Islamic rule in the Middle East.[24] These advances have linked up with the surge of scholarship that has revolutionized the study of Syriac Christianity in the periods both before and after the Islamic conquests. Altogether, the theme of Late Antiquity and Islam is in the air. We need only consult the superb catalogue of the exhibition entitled *Byzantium and Islam: A Transition*, which took place in 2012 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, to realize how much the study of the relations between Islam and the rich cultures of the pre-Islamic Middle East has advanced since the beginning of this century.[25]

Why has this been so? It is largely because we no longer treat Islam and Christianity as if they were totally incommensurable – as if they were hermetically sealed entities, incapable of communicating with each other. I trust that I made plain in chapter 13 that Islam was not a phenomenon that came out of the blue. The roots of Islam lay in an Arabian peninsula that was by no means a bleak and isolated desert. The Hijâz, in which the prophet Muhammad received his message, was part of the great echo chamber of religious ideas that had developed throughout the Middle East in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. We have also realized the zest with which the early Muslims appropriated and adapted the artistic and technical skills of the regions which they conquered. This is immediately apparent in the novel architecture of the Ummayad palaces of Jordan, such as Qusayr ʿAmra and Mshatta. These show a world whose artistic horizons had come to embrace both Byzantium and Iran.[26]

What has been less studied until now is the curiosity mingled with a sharp competitive edge with which the early Muslims engaged the Christian and Jewish communities of the Middle East. They came as conquerors. But they also believed that they held the best religion. We must remember that Muslims did not see themselves as upholding a religion that was utterly different from that of Jews and Christians (as paganism had been seen by Christians). Rather, Islam was seen by Muslims as the culmination of Judaism and Christianity. It was a religion "victorious over every religion."[27] But how could Muslims prove that they had the best religion? Only by scrutinizing and debating the beliefs of others, and by constantly measuring their own beliefs and practices against those of Jews and Christians. Put bluntly: Muslims needed Jews and Christians to tell them who they were. It was only through dialogue – and not through the crude fact of conquest – that Muslims could be confident that they, and they alone, were a distinctive and privileged religious community.

From Asceticism to Holy War

Hence the seriousness of Muslim intellectual engagement with the Christians around them. From a very early time, Arab Muslims joined in the theological and philosophical debates whose continued vigor and openness to questioners of all kinds we have recently come to appreciate in our study of the Syriac literature of the time.

We have begun to realize that the influence of these debates went deep. As the challenging book of the late Tom Sizgorich has shown, the crucial notion of the *jihâdi* – of the warrior saint in early Islam, who died fighting the infidels – was precipitated by arguments as to which form of heroism was superior: the world-denying asceticism of the martyr and the desert monk, or the world-affirming energy of committed Muslims engaged in holy war. It was a crucial debate about different forms of militant devotion, and about what form best summed up the virtues of the Muslim community.[28]

The Muslim idealization of death on the battlefield should not be seen as an unthinking expression of bloodthirsty fanaticism. It had been arrived at through a conscious wish on the part of Muslims to define themselves against non-Muslims – especially against Christians. Muslims continued to respect Christian notions of holiness. But they needed to put forward an alternative that went beyond the Christians. What they found was a hard doctrine. The notion of *jihâd* repelled Jews and Christians. Ever since, it has played a major role in the negative image of Islam. But, like calluses raised on the skin by constant rubbing, it was a hard doctrine which emerged through constant, close contact with Christian monks, with Christian legends of the martyrs, and with Christian debaters.

Last but not least, the Muslims absorbed the populations of the Middle East by offering acceptable narratives of their own success as conquerors. These narratives paid attention to Christian opinion and often fastened on and transformed Christian local traditions.[29] Far from being converted violently at the point of the sword, many Christians slowly but surely talked themselves into becoming Muslims. Not all Christians did this. Up to the year 1000, Muslims and not Christians were in the minority in the Middle East. Many Christian churches have survived up to this day. But those who did convert to Islam were enabled by these stories to take a large part of their own past, their own legends, and their own local traditions with them into the new faith. The civilization of medieval Islam drew much of its strength and richness from these incessant conversations, of which we today can catch only the occasional echo. In this and in so many other ways, we can see how the history of early Islam was

inextricably entangled with the history of the Christianities of the East. For that reason, no history of Christendom – not even of western Christendom – can ignore it.

Civilization and the Fall of Rome

But now is the time to return to the West, and to ask a blunt question: what was the overall evolution of western Europe before and after the fall of the Roman empire? How have our views on this crucial question changed since the beginning of the century?

What has changed is that a strident current of public opinion has turned to the fall of Rome as a warning for contemporary Europe. Many state that the fall of the Roman empire was an unmitigated catastrophe, and that this catastrophe could repeat itself in our own times:

> Rome is the cradle of our Western civilization – the most advanced and superior civilization the world has ever known. … the history of Rome … serves as a warning … [for Rome] suffered a loss of belief in its own civilization. The Romans … did not perceive the immigration of the Barbarians as a threat until it was too late. … But then, on December 31st in the year 406, the Rhine froze and tens of thousands of Germanic Barbarians crossed the river, flooded the Empire and went on a rampage, destroying every city they passed. … The fall of Rome was a traumatic experience.[30]

In the words of another writer, "the storm of the Barbarian Migrations – the *Völkerwanderung* – [and t]he collapse of the Roman Empire brought about a regression of civilization that was only brought to an end … seven hundred years later."[31]

It is revealing that these two seemingly innocuous summaries of common views of the fall of Rome appear in statements issued by two leaders of extreme xenophobic movements – Geert Wilders, in his notorious speech in Rome of 25 March 2011, and Thilo Sarrazin, in his provocative book, *Deutschland schafft sich ab* [Germany does away with itself] (by failing to control Turkish immigration).

The story of the fall of Rome has always left in the back of our minds a heavy sediment of fear and regret. Such a narrative is calculated to be disturbing. It presents a complacent empire, a silent build-up of pressure from outside, a sudden breakthrough, a murderous rampage and then, silence … the extinction of civilization for many centuries. What is regrettable is that this narrative should erupt, from time to time, to serve the purposes of toxic political movements in contemporary Europe. For this

reason it is particularly important to get the story right. What really happened in western Europe between 400 and 800 A.D.?

The Drift from Rome

There are today many books on this subject, to which we can now turn. I trust that the reader will forgive me if I concentrate on a few major works to which I have recently turned frequently and with gratitude when writing a study of the use of wealth in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages – *Through the Eye of a Needle. Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD*.[32] I trust that the reader will do what I did when using them – work outwards from their abundant footnotes and bibliographies (like exploring the root systems of great plants) to find yet further exciting articles and books.

One of the most invigorating of these books is Guy Halsall's *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568*.[33] This book contains careful and fair-minded surveys of the principal points of debate between scholars. How did barbarians think of themselves: that is, what role, if any, did a sense of belonging to a specific "ethnic" group play in the relations of barbarians to each other and to the Roman populations? How did barbarians settle within the empire: was it a brutal and disruptive land grab, or was it based on a carefully organized funneling of pre-existing tax revenues to barbarian "guests" in such a way that the social structures of each region were left undisturbed? When we speak of "Barbarian Migrations," what precise patterns did these follow: did the barbarians come in uncontrollable "floods" (as is so often implied), or were their movements more piecemeal and less dramatic?

Above all, Halsall's great skill as an archaeologist has enabled him to tell the story of the fall of Rome as a silent change. He traces the dwindling of Rome. Through careful attention to an archaeological record that stretches from Britain to the Danube he shows how Rome slowly lost its grip on the imagination and on the value systems of the inhabitants of the empire and their neighbors in the course of the fifth and early sixth centuries. We should note what he does not find. He does not find evidence of widespread destruction in the wake of imagined barbarian hordes. Nor does he find a catastrophic drop in the standard of living of the Roman populations. Still less does he find evidence of monolithic barbarian immigration into Roman territory.

Instead, Halsall examines changing forms of burial, changing messages of prestige and gender relations communicated through jewelry and weapons, and hints of changed horizons revealed by changes of fashion in personal

ornament, as motifs taken from Rome, Scandinavia, and the steppes of Asia competed for prominence. These reveal a silent turning of the tide that finds no mention in the sources on which conventional narratives of the fall of Rome are based. Halsall uses the well-chosen words of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* to describe this change. It was the result of innumerable "unhistoric acts" by those who "lived … a hidden life and rest in unvisited graves."[34] All over Europe, relatively well-to-do men and women – Romans and barbarians alike – had begun to vote with their feet against Rome. After centuries in which Rome had been the central point of reference for ideas of civilization, of proper conduct, and of proper gender relations, they had begun to see that, despite the fears of many of them, there was nothing wrong about not being Roman.

Before and After Rome: States, Taxes, and Societies

Halsall's synthesis sets the scene for Chris Wickham's magnificent book, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800*.[35] This book will replace Pirenne's *Mohammed and Charlemagne* as the starting point of all future discussion of the society and economy of early medieval Europe. What these two books have in common is that both spell out the long-term rhythms of a change in which barbarian invasions and the fall of Rome were only one stage among many.

For Wickham, the story begins with the weakening ability and final failure of the Roman state to bring in the taxes. For the late Roman state was notorious for its unusual fiscal appetite. Indeed, apart from demanding taxes, the Roman empire had never done as much for its citizens as our exalted image of Rome might lead us to expect. It did not protect the Roman populations against the barbarians. Rather, as we have seen, it created the image of a barbarian threat so as to justify its fiscal demands. Nor did it bring much security to the civilian population. Recently discovered letters of Augustine reveal a high level of violence in town and countryside that had nothing to do with the barbarian invasions. A nun was raped while visiting a neighboring estate to buy wool.[36] A retired military man (in league with a corrupt bishop) terrorized a village.[37] Slave traders descended on isolated hamlets in the mountains behind Hippo, "with horrifying yells, dressed like soldiers or barbarians."[38] Officials were lynched by angry mobs.[39] The extent of sectarian violence in Africa was notorious.[40] Even at the height of the empire, life was dangerous in any part of it: a man was advised to make his will, in case of sudden death "at the hands of the [barbarian] enemy, of brigands, or through the cruelty or hatred of a powerful man."[41]

But there was one thing the fourth-century Roman state did well, which was to extract money from its subjects. Paradoxically, as Wickham and others have pointed out, high taxation did not ruin the populations of the empire. Rather, high tax demands primed the pump for a century of hectic economic growth.[42] Fiscal pressure forced open the closed economies of the countryside. The peasantry had to increase production so as to earn the money with which to pay taxes. The collection of taxes offered unparalleled opportunities for enrichment for landowners, tax collectors, and bureaucrats. What was gathered through taxes was redistributed at the top, in the form of gifts and salaries paid in solid gold. This process created the swaggering new class whose worldly ambitions we describe in chapter 2. The villas of this class continue to impress the archaeologists.[43] In the irreverent words of archaeologists discussing the great villas of Spain, theirs was a prosperity "tied to an imperial gravy train."[44]

The problem was that once the gravy train was jolted by a series of military crises, none of which were catastrophic in themselves, the great engine of enrichment stalled and, eventually, stopped. What strikes Wickham was the speed with which upper-class Roman society sank back to a low level. No longer disciplined by the tax collector, the peasantry slacked off. They returned to subsistence farming. Rents fell. As incomes dwindled, the rich no longer reached out, as they had done in the glory days of the fourth century, to buy fine pottery, statuary, high-quality wines and exotic foods. They made do with the products of their region. Trade dwindled. Horizons became more limited. As Wickham sees it, we end, around the year 600 A.D., with a world of smaller units, ruled by low-pressure states. The local aristocracies declined into genteel poverty. The days of the great villas were past. At a time when the floors of country houses all over the eastern empire still glittered with mosaics covered with merry and sensuous mythological figures, the villas of the West had been turned into farmhouses.[45] As a result, in Wickham's opinion, if anyone was happy in the early Middle Ages, it was the peasantry. Freed at last from the double pressure of landlords and tax collectors, they settled back to enjoy a low-profile golden age.

In Wickham's view, barbarian invasions, as we usually imagine them, played little role in this slow process of downsizing. They brought no widespread destruction. But, in one way, the barbarian invasions and the civil wars of the early fifth century did prove decisive. They broke the spine of the empire as a tax-gathering machine. Within a century, they had overturned one of the "pillars of bigness" on which not only the court and the army, but the economy and the high pitched social structure of the later Roman empire, had depended.[46]

"Local Romanness" against "Central Romanness": Regionalism and the End of Empire

But how had this come to happen so quickly, and with such apparently irrevocable results? Wickham's emphasis on the collapse of the capacity and the will to tax can be fleshed out by a factor which Halsall has underlined. We must never forget how intensely regional the society of the Roman West had always been. The empire governed through enlisting the support of the local elites. These were members of the minor nobility. Their wealth and horizons did not extend far beyond their city or their province. They were proud little men and women. They were often less subservient to the court than were the grandees associated with the Senate of Rome and the imperial administration. The barbarian invasions of the early fifth century (and the civil wars that accompanied them) revealed the crucial gap between such persons and the central government: "the key factor in the break-up of the Empire was the exposure of a critical fault-line between the imperial government and the interests of the regional elites."[47] Reviewing the history of the fifth-century West, Peter Heather has come to the same conclusion. In a pungent sub-heading, he summed up the fall of the empire in the West as "The Destruction of Central Romanness." By this he meant the loss of the ability of the Roman state, its servants, and those with an interest in maintaining the ideology of empire at full strength to impose their will on the "local Romans" of the provinces.[48]

Paradoxically, the defeat of "Central Romanness" did not lead to a victory of barbarism. In most provinces it was a victory of "local Romanness" in collaboration with barbarians at the expense of the imperial center. It is this alliance of local Romans and local barbarians (and not the imagined ravages of the barbarian invasions) which needs to be explained. Somehow, a tacit deal between barbarians and local Romans was struck in the course of the fifth century. It was a deal based on innumerable "unhistoric acts" of symbiosis, collaboration, even of cultural treason. What did this deal mean for the overall development of the West?

Put bluntly: what brought down the western empire was the speed with which the barbarian armies were able to create local power blocs through collaboration with the local Romans. For the local elites, the barbarians brought a Rome of sorts to their own region. These power blocs attracted Roman litigants, Roman bureaucrats, Roman courtiers, and Roman military personnel. By the end of the fifth century, Latin literature began to flourish at barbarian courts.[49] The western empire was not so much

destroyed as eroded and finally rendered unnecessary by a score of little Romes, rooted in more restricted areas of control. These little Romes were largely in the hands of the local nobilities, of energetic little men who had replaced and even helped to despoil the grandees of the imperial *ancien régime*.

But there was a cost. Not only did barbarians become more Roman. Everyone has tended to approve of that development, both at the time and in the modern scholarly tradition. Studies of the Romanization of the barbarians abound. But the notion that Romans might want to cease to be Romans has always caused disquiet. Surely so massive an identity, piled up over the centuries, and of such a superior nature, cannot – indeed, should not – shift within a few generations? But this may have happened more often than we think. Like sex in the Victorian Age, cases of well-to-do Romans collaborating from an early time with the barbarians, and adopting barbarian customs – above all, a taste for war – were seldom mentioned in polite society. But, like sex, they happened.

Soldier and Civilian in a Changing World

In the last ten years, we may have come closer to understanding this strange blockage in our own perception of the fifth-century world. Studies of the late Roman empire had tended to bifurcate. The study of the frontiers and of the army tends to be separated from the study of the civilian population. Hence a bias toward a view of the Roman world which privileged the magnificently voluble intellectuals of the Mediterranean at the expense of a very different sort of local Romans, connected with the Roman frontiers and with the Roman army. A zone of silence tends to fall between the two components of Roman society, as if they lived on two separate planets.[50] As a result, the barbarians appear to have come from nowhere. In fact, the barbarians had followed paths already laid down by the military that led straight to the heart of Mediterranean society

In the late Roman empire, military and civilian had long lived cheek by jowl. Military men and military values were mixed like iron filings into the clay of civilian life. They carried with them a distinctive culture that was already halfway to the barbarian world. Many features which we nowadays tend to associate with the fierce barbarians of the north began as customs of the Roman military. Embroidered trousers, great swinging cloaks, large gold brooches, and heavy belt-buckles were only the most visible among them.[51]

From Civil War to Convulsion

Of these military habits, the most upsetting to the civilian population was the zest for civil war. Again and again – indeed nine times in 83 years (from 312 to 395) – Roman soldiers had butchered their colleagues in murderous civil wars. Emperors wept (or, at least, made sure that everybody believed that they had wept) as they viewed the piles of Roman corpses that strewed the battlefield after such engagements.[52] As Brent Shaw has shown, the true "killing fields" of the fourth century were not along the frontiers. They were in northern Italy and the Balkans, where sanguinary battles were regularly fought between rival emperors.[53]

What happened in the fifth century was that civil war expanded to include "proxy war" through the use of barbarian groups. Careful studies of the chronology and logistics of the civil wars of the early fifth century have shown that all the major breakthroughs by the barbarians either were part of maneuvers directly connected with civil wars, or at least were made possible by the distraction caused by civil wars. Far from rushing headlong from the woods of Germany to the heart of the Mediterranean, most barbarians were as good as "bussed" there by rival Roman usurpers – first to southwest Gaul and then across the Pyrenees into Spain.[54] It was not the barbarian invasions in themselves that changed the face of Europe. It was the synergy between barbarian groups, the long Roman practice of civil war, and the opportunism with which local Romans exploited both barbarians and civil war conditions for their own purposes. For this reason, it may be wise to abandon the term "barbarian invasions" as a description of the period. It would be better to use a term that has been used by historians of Japan when speaking of the century of civil war which afflicted Kyoto and other regions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – that is, "convulsion": an involvement of all segments of the population in a shake-up from which a very different society would emerge.[55]

Loyalty: from Emperor to King

A central feature of this new society proved to be a former Roman military habit that was destined for a long future: that was the habit of personal loyalty. This has been made clear by the remarkable book of Stefan Esders, *Sacramentum fidelitatis: Treueid, Militärwesen und Formierung mittelalterlicher Staatlichkeit* [Oath of fidelity: loyalty oath, military culture and the formation of a medieval style of rule]. Esders shows that the intense personal