Celsus, the First Nietzsche: Resentment and the Case Against Christianity

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I

Christianity shares with Judaism the ability to provoke resentment against its own persistent undermining of resentment. Nothing infuriates the critics of Judaism and Christianity – but especially of Christianity – more than the gentle admonition to turn the other cheek. Like the swellfoot outsider, Biblical religion becomes a magnet for every imaginable accusation, inspiring a voluminous *Schimpflexicon* of calumny and abuse.

Thus, while my main theme is resentment as a response to Judaism and Christianity, with the emphasis on Christianity, I nevertheless wish to begin by addressing a specific form taken by resentment: Verbal mud-slinging, or vilification, which, although primitive, yet bears a relation both to philosophy and poetics. A remarkable continuity of anti-Biblical vilification unites Imperial Neoplatonists in the Second Century with Allemanic Antiplatonists in the Nineteenth and both again with academic investigators of the so-called historical or pre-Gospel Jesus in the Late Twentieth. At all stages of this continuum, the identical tropes lend their articulating power to the argument (namely that Judaism and Christianity distort some true doctrine and that we must regard them as examples of low-grade plagiarism, or that Jews and Christians themselves act out of resentment) and the identical animus blinds the arguer to his own limitations and prejudices. But such self-deceptions would seem inevitable given the internal logic of arbitrary accusation, and only he who is without sin ought run the risk of throwing stones, even when the stones are only verbal.

By virtue of its paradoxical nature, of course, vilification invariably makes a cynosure of what it wishes to quash or expel; mud-slinging foolishly grants

importance precisely where it wishes to deny importance; and the vilifier inevitably betrays the weakness (his own) that he wants to mask under the appearance of strength. Vilification cannot escape the marks of engaging in a contest and a contest always entails a second party, a rival, whose presence demands attention and appears to force action. At the root of vilification, which bears all the marks of a ritual performance, lies resentment: The intuition that an interloping equal has manifested himself whose presence disrupts an existing settlement and in so doing threatens conflict.

“This town ain’t big enough for the both of us,” is the usual subjective formulation of the problem, and in it the challenger admits to his rivalry with the one whom his rhetoric would reduce, in advance, to submission. Insofar as any expulsion of the interloper requires the cooperation of one’s neighbors, however, the rhetorical expression of the problem needs all at once to cast the interloper in a bad light and recruit a mob to aid in running him off, the rival’s automatic submission not being guaranteed. The public utterance, intended as suasory, must therefore conceal the implicit equality of plaintiff and defendant inadvertently divulged by the intuition, so that what one says at last in the pre-lynching huddle is that “there ain’t no room for *varmints* around here,” a sentiment with which it is hard to disagree.

This transition from the sentence that a subject rehearses silently to himself to the one that he addresses to his fellow lynchers can, moreover, be analyzed a stage further, for the second sentence, the one about *varmints,* is not really a sentence at all, but a type of ostensive. *Varmint* is not an explanatory category; it is, rather, a mere pointing-in-disgust, or alarm, whose pragmatic sequel is known almost instinctively to the lynch-mob, who can act it out quite readily, should the need arise. Vilification, as it turns out, is simply another word for *myth,* just as *myth* in its turn serves as a synonym for *accusation.* A myth is an accusation. Consider, for example, Oedipus, that powerful interloper, who slew his father and slept with his mother and brought the plague to Thebes: Teiresias and Creon each at first argue, in two paradigmatic stichomythiai with their opponent, that “this town ain’t big enough for the both of us.” Yet it ultimately comes down to the reductive claim that Oedipus is a *varmint* (father-slayer, mother-lover, plague-bringer, etc.), so out with him. Not even Oedipus himself, at that point, can dissent from the pharmakotic solidarity: “Take me away, my friends, the greatly miserable, / The most accursed, whom God too hates, / Above all men on earth,” as Sophocles makes him say. Likewise, in Shakespeare, Brutus apropos Caesar must first “think him as a serpent’s egg, / Which, hatched, as would his kind grow mischievous,” whereupon he resolves to “kill him in the shell.” Brutus is shouting *snake!* and a snake, of course, is a *varmint.*

The charge of *varmintry,* if I might be allowed to call it that, is made in explicit form against the Christians and the Jews together in Part IV of the Celsian *Alethes Logos,* or *True Doctrine,* a critique mainly of Christianity, but also of Judaism, ascribed to a philosophically eclectic author (now a Platonist, now an Epicurean) of the eighties of the Second Century. “As to the squabbles of the Jews and the Christians,” Celsus opines, “I can only say that these sects remind me of a cluster of bats or ants escaping a nest, a bunch of frogs holding council in a swamp, or a clutch of worms assembling in the muck: all of them disagreeing over who is the worst sinner” (Hoffman’s translation 79). Given the social and philosophical characterization of the Christians which Celsus has deployed in Parts I through III of his discourse, his sudden crying-out of *worm!* comes as no surprise. The faith of the Christians corresponds to a mere “hope of worms” (86), Celsus has earlier asserted. And to the followers of Jesus, Celsus has applied the adjective “wormlike” (79), making them even more obnoxious, in his estimation, than the Jews, who qualify as simple “runaway slaves who escaped from Egypt” (79). The Christians, in the Celsian picture of them, dwell in the subterranean spaces of the civic world just as the earthworm dwells in soil, under a rock, secretive and hidden from sight. The Christian *miasma* threatens to contaminate the larger situation in which it occurs.

In *The True Doctrine,* Part VII, Celsus refers to the worshipers of Jesus in the figure of the man who “demeans himself in a humiliating fashion, throwing himself headlong upon the ground; crawling on his knees; garbing himself like a beggar in rags; smearing himself with the dirt of the road” (94). In his search for the appropriate vilifying metaphor, Celsus discards both his bats and his ants, selecting finally the grubbing, crawling worm. Elsewhere indeed Celsus endows the lucky ants with civic consciousness and science. It is well known, he remarks, that the ants “have a fully developed intelligence[,] and it seems they have as well a clear-cut notion of certain universal laws, and even a voice to make the experience of their learning known to others of their kind” (83-84). By comparison with the people of the Gospels, the ants reveal themselves under the type of a superior species, endowed with the same virtues as the proper Imperial citizenry whose social order Jesus and his followers threaten grubbily from within. The conceit that ants partake in a knowledge of “universal laws” even makes of them a kind of Platonic ideal citizenry, and the orderliness of the formicary thus contrasts positively with the blind and degraded digging of worms. Celsus’ animosity against the Christians is obviously great, and his condescension high, and while the worm, disgusting and non-sentient, is his central metaphor for dispensing with them, his ire finds other, equally miasmatic figures.

A catalogue will give an idea of the range of vilification that Celsus deploys around his central and essential vermicular trope. Celsus styles the Christians as “scum” (75); “naught but dung” (102); “lower class, vulgar, ignorant” (57); perpetrators of

“hypocrisy” (53); “gullible believers” (54); “ludicrously misled” (60); “babbling fools” (108); forsakers of the “natural inclination” to believe in the traditional gods (56); “thoroughly bound to flesh-and-blood concerns [and] not a little unsmart by most applicable standards” (121); “just as proud as the Jews” (70); concocters of “an absolutely absurd doctrine of everlasting punishment and rewards” (70); in their practice “no better than dog or goat worship[ers] at their worst” (71); “charlatan[s] who promise to restore sick bodies to health” (75); a people who “utterly detest each other” and “slander each other constantly with the vilest forms o abuse” (91); a people who “refuse their religious duties, rushing headlong to offend the emperor and the governors and to invite their wrath” (124); and finally, a people “who act as though they have some deeper revelation that entitles them to turn away from their friends and countrymen on the pretext that they have reached a higher level of piety” (89).

Celsus presents a critique of Jesus, too, who in his view constitutes “a mere man” (69); “arrogant” (61); “an evildoer” (62); “a sorcerer” (60); “a conspirator” (63); “a boaster and sorcerer” (60); the son of a woman “convicted of adultery” (57); a “so-called savior” (57); a consorter with “unsavory characters” (59); “a coward and a liar” (65); “a low-grade character” (64) and an “author of insurrection” (116), the story of whose life is nothing more than “a monstrous fiction” (64).

As to the conjunction of the Christian people and their dubious God in the institution of the church, Celsus puts it this way:

> The cult of Christ is a secret society whose members huddle together in corners for fear of being brought to trial and punishment. Their persistence is the persistence of a group threatened by a common danger, and danger is a more powerful incentive to fraternal feeling than is any oath… They also practice their rites in secret in order to avoid the sentence of death that looms over them. (53)

3

Celsus views Christianity as, thus, a conspicuous and obnoxious species of internal flight from the order and reality of the great civic world, so that one will likely find its adherents skulking, rodent- or worm-like, in the dark corners of the worldly house. Conspiratorially secretive, Christianity suggests an actual fifth column and in fact has already fallen under legal proscription in an edict published by Nero after the fires that destroyed the tenement-districts of Rome and which Nero blamed on Jews, Christians, and other foreigners resident in the Imperial city. The Celsian phrase “sentence of death” seems in any case to imply that the Christians, in the

moment when Celsus wrote, suffered from liability to prosecution, if they were not just then the object of widespread, organized harassment. We know that, in the late Second Century, the official attitude toward Christianity hardened: Even under the Stoic indifference of Marcus, significant regional persecutions occurred in Carthage and Lyons (in 177 and 180 A.D. respectively) and presaged the variously articulated universal crackdowns of the early Third Century, the most important of which was the edict of Decius (issued circa 240). Most of the martyrdoms occurred in the Third Century.

II

From the Celsian perspective, the continued presence of a subversive proletariat poses a real threat to the Imperial order, if not of direct or sudden action than by the more frightening means of creeping mimesis, for, as Celsus says, “if everyone were to adopt the Christian’s attitude [of hostility toward the ritual forms of Imperial existence] there would be no rule of law: The legitimate authority would be abandoned [and] earthly things would return to chaos and come into the hands of the lawless and savage barbarians” (124). Nor does the danger lie at some distant remove. Celsus understands Christianity as an insurgency anxious to increase its membership through active recruitment and thereby to multiply the number of restive plaintiffs against the establishment. “Taking its root in the lower classes,” writes Celsus, “the religion continues to spread among the vulgar: Nay, one can even say it spreads because of its vulgarity and the illiteracy of its adherents” (57). In a theological variant on Gresham’s Law, bad faith drives out good, and a debased theological coinage threatens the ecumene. Our critic of Christianity holds it against the Christians that they prey on the intellectually untutored and socially unassimilated, so that “wherever one finds a crowd of adolescent boys, or a bunch of slaves, or a company of fools, there will the Christian teachers be also” (73), plying their trade of subornation and deceit on those least equipped to detect it. These teachers, furthermore, engage in outright mischief: They brazenly claim that “they alone know the right way to live, and that if only the children will believe them, they will be happy and their homes will be happy as well” (73). It is Celsus, of course, who knows the right way to live, for his is the *True Doctrine.* Once again, we find ourselves witnessing a subtle stichomythia, a clash of rivals.

Celsus complains that the Christians not only confuse children by telling them absurd stories and making eccentric claims but actively turn them against their parents, urging them to maintain silence in their homes about their new belief, even while they mutely despise the traditional cults of the paternal household; the Christians even encourage children “to rebel” against their parents in the active way (73) which, from the Roman perspective, is a dastardly infraction of the most sacred of all social bonds. Here again, the Christians fill the role, for Celsus, of

internal corrupters acting on the body social from within, breaking it down just as worms break down a infected organs or, latterly, a corpse. Robin Lane Fox reminds us that “in the 180s, we do happen to know of Christians in more prominent places [than previously] and there does seem to be a rise in the number of such people in Rome, Carthage, and Alexandria” (*Pagans and Christians* 272). Thus, despite their secretiveness, the followers of Jesus must have appeared to Celsus to be mounting a deliberate and growing challenge to the established order. The word *rebel* fits them in their boorish way, because they refuse to acknowledge the common duties and rites, and in this sense they represent a danger exemplified historically by events like the Spartacist Slave Rebellion and the Conspiracy of Catiline. The very conspicuity of the Christians’ conspicuous internal secession, coupled with their bold recruitment, constitutes an impropriety which might easily become an enormity, thus sweeping order into chaos and opening the way for the barbarians.

I find it interesting, in light of the argumentative as opposed to the vilifying side of the Celsian case against Christianity, that Peter Brown, in his writings on Late Antiquity, refers to the period in which we find Celsus as an age of *philotimia,* or “ambition,” which all at the same time recognizes ambition as one of its greatest problems. Quoting one of the protagonist’s speeches from *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus, Brown remarks that the people of the second and third centuries sensed that the equilibrium of their ecumenical order maintained itself precariously and that the greatest threat to its stability came from the same forces that generated it in the first place: Zeal, competitiveness, a hunger for acquisition and a pride in display. The archaizing or conservative attitudes which historians associate with the Antonine phase of the Empire, Brown writes, stemmed from and were part of the complex of social instruments intended to exert control over “the disruptive forces of *philotimia*” (*The Making of Late Antiquity* 34) which emerged with the Antonine solidification of Roman world society. Thus the social “model of parity” (35) evolved by the Antonine elites to maintain social cohesion amounted to “firm upward limits to the aspirations of individuals” (35), and extended not just to economic or political ambition, but to theological self-assertion, as well.

4

Excessive holiness, as Brown explains, could be quite as destabilizing as excessive wealth:

> Men committed to constant competition within a “model of parity” are not likely to allow any one of their peers to draw heavily on sources of power and prestige over which they have no control. Appeals to the other world as a source of special status in this world had to be kept within strictly

> conventional limits if they were to be acceptable. Plutarch knew what he was talking about when he dismissed those who, in order "to be reputed the favorites of heaven and above the common sort, invest their doings with a character of sanctity." (35)

Syncretism, writ large, acquires a new comprehensibility under Brown's explanation. Committed pragmatically to relativism in the domain of religion, politicians, priests, and intellectuals needed to insist that one god was as good as another, except in the case where his adherents insisted that he was better than any other, or even exclusively *the God* to the detriment of all others. For at least one emperor, Alexander Severus (222-235), this was a matter of conscious policy: "In his domestic chapel," as Edward Gibbon reports, "he placed statues of Abraham, of Orpheus, of Apollonius and of Christ, as an honour due to those respectable sages who had instructed Mankind in the various modes of addressing their homage to the supreme and universal deity" (in Toynbee [V 549]). Yet like modern multiculturalism, the Severan type of syncretism could only have been a piece of official propaganda, or at best a half-hearted pose of the elites, since the adherents of the many cults remained parochial in their outlook. Those who revered Abraham did not also revere Orpheus and Apollo, nor did those who revered Christ also revere Apollonius, who, taking Philostratus at his word, was a remarkably rivalrous fellow for a sage.

In an age of ambition threatened by the destructive impulse stemming from its chief characteristic, *philotimia,* epistemological relativism functions not so much as an explanation of the *de facto* religious pluralism of the Empire but rather as a dogmatic prescription which prevents the accretion of too great a popularity around any particular divinity or revelation. The authority behind the tolerance among cults is, after all, the *Faustrecht* of the emperor. Celsus maintains the position of a steadfast relativist (if that is not a contradiction in terms) and part of his animus against Christianity involves Christianity's rigidly exclusive – therefore non-relativistic – claims. At one level, this concerns the parochialism of Jewish and Christian scriptures. A kind of *philosophia perennis et universalis* exists of which the plethora of parochial doctrines of the ecumenic world known to Celsus add up to so many late and local developments. Or so Celsus argues. Thus "Mosaic history," for example, "is [only] one among many, and those who attempt to universalize it or disguise its partiality by treating the books of Moses allegorically [wiser though they may be than those who take such accounts at face value] are being led astray and deceived" (55). The "one among many" must not be allowed to arrogate and aggrandize itself into a an undivided and dominant "one" compared to which all others would shrink away into insignificance: That would put too much pressure on the Brownian "model of parity" and invite uncontrolled conflictual mimesis.

Again, says Celsus, “were we to read the literature of but one nation, we would conclude that there had been but one flood, one conflagration, one disruption of the created order. But in reality there have been many floods, many conflagrations – those floods in the time of Deucalion and the fire in the time of Phaeton being more recent than the rest” (55-56). Jews and Christians together, then, arouse the just ire of other people by insisting on the unique validity of their peculiar histories over all others, disturbing the parity that makes the Greek flood as significant in its field as, say, the Babylonian or the Egyptian. In the same way, the miracles of Asclepius ought to be honored as richly as those of Jesus, if he really effected any, but the Christians petulantly ignore those of Asclepius, bruiting those of Jesus as though there were no others. Nor does Jesus’ having risen from the dead, if he did so, distinguish the Christ from “Zalmoxis… Pythagoras… Rhampsinitus… Orpheus… Protesilaus… Herakles… or Theseus” (67), for every one of those also enjoyed a resurrection from the dead or at least claimed to have done so. Celsus argues that the ubiquity of fundamental themes in myth and theology is explained by the ultimate derivation of them all from an ancient and primordial source which can be guessed at behind their similarity in multiplicity.

But the Celsian syncretistic relativism does not stop at the objection to an attempt at narrative monopoly (in which one story shall prevail over all others); it includes the domain of moral perceptions, as well. Finally, it will enter into the depths of epistemology and ontology.

5

Let me take up the problem of moral perception and Christianity within the Celsian argument. It is in this matter that Celsus begins to sound like a modern, or even like a contemporary, relativist, or like on of our advocates of mandatory respect for everything and anything. Celsus takes note of the Christian assertion – in his mind highly counter-intuitive – that men live in a flooding tide of evil. As the world stems from a single instance of creation and cannot suffer alteration, no part of it, material or moral, may either increase or decrease in proportion to the others. Thus, Celsus argues,

> There is a sort of arrogance in the assumption of the Christians that evil is on the rise. Even if something seems evil to you it is far from clear whether it is really evil; one person with his limited perspective on the whole state of creation is unequipped to know whether what is good for you is good for someone else in the universe, and vice versa. (82)

This charge parallels the one, cited earlier, that the Christians assume an

unjustifiable holier-than-thou attitude towards their fellow citizens. No knowledge exceeds the merely partial and any which pretends to exceed it offends against the decorum so necessary for maintaining the harmony of competing moral interpretations. Dependents on the Empire, subjects of the lowest order who should be grateful that their lot is not worse, the Christians as seen by Celsus nevertheless exhibit an uncouth inclination to Oedipal hybris. Brown reminds us that, in the context of an age of ambition, “tacit resentments” (21) tended to accrue against any individual or group whose stance or behavior “clashed with the ideal of unaffected, unostentatious and unmanipulative relations current among his [or its] visible neighbors” (39). The Christians’ voluble insistence on a singular and orthodox account of good and evil inevitably strikes Celsus as so much exasperating unphilosophic obstreperousness. Christian teachings pile “absurdities” (72) atop “preposterous suggestions” (73) atop “very stupid fables” (81) in an aggressive and offensive manner. While Celsus never invokes the Late Antique category of *superstition* by name, he nevertheless makes implicit use of it in these and other particulars of his case.

Origen designates Celsus as an Epicurean. The term *superstitio* occurs prominently in Lucretius’ Epicurean poem *De rerum natura,* where it refers to crude beliefs, of a magical or sacred character, which inhibit the exercise of reason and keep men in thrall to a pointless and often degrading tradition. In Book Two, for example, of his poem Lucretius invokes what he calls “the terrors of superstition” (61); later in the same book he refers to “the foul taint of superstition” (79); and later still, in Book Five, he characterizes superstition as the degrading “prostration on the ground with palms outspread before the shrines of the gods” (208) demanded by what he sees as irrational power-cults. Superstition is a mistake about the nature of reality, and to prostrate oneself before a mistake is akin to relinquishing one’s humanity. Now the last of these irate dismissals finds an echo in *The True Doctrine,* in the Celsian image of the Christian oblating himself wormlike in the mud, a figure to which I have already called attention. Brown, for his part, defines the Antonine notion of superstition as one which addressed, not the intensity of a man’s belief, but rather the gentility or lack thereof in his expression of that belief. Thus, says Brown, “the superstitious man was like a sorcerer” (39) of the flamboyant type depicted by Lucian in his satires; and such a man followed his *philotimia* without reserve in order to sway clients to his cause and accrue the power of a demagogue. Such discomportment scandalized Antonine piety, in part, because it replicated the actual power structures of the Empire too nakedly, thereby arousing the awareness of resentment generally and inviting the conflict which inevitably springs from resentment.

Celsus emphasizes both the sorcery, hence the superstition, of the Christians and their internecine fractiousness. “The Christians claim to get some sort of power

from pronouncing the names of demons or saying certain incantations, always incorporating the name Jesus and a short story about him in the formula," Celsus writes (53); and while the men whom he calls "the Christian healers" do indeed have the expertise "to produce noisy crashes and effects" while "pretend[ing] to do miracles in Jesus' name," they nevertheless "conjure [only] by means of silks and curtains, numbers, stones, plants and the assorted paraphernalia that one expects of such people" (98). Profligate displays of this sort galvanize the unlettered and turn them not simply against society at large but against each other. Ostentation leads to mimesis which leads in turn to conflict. Celsus has noted that among those who denominate themselves Christians one can find many sharply distinct sects or cults, many of which regard one another with intense mutual hostility.

> While some of the Christians proclaim [that] they have the same god as do the Jews, others insist that there is another god higher than the creator-god and opposed to him. And some Christians teach that the Son came from this higher god. Still others admit of a third god – those, that is to say, who call themselves gnostics – and still others, though calling themselves Christians, want to live according to the laws of the Jews. I could also mention those who call themselves Simonians after Simon, and those naming themselves Helenians after Helen, his consort. There are Christian sects named after Marcellina, Harpocratian Christians who trace themselves to Salome, and some who follow Mariamne and others who follow Martha, and still others who call themselves Marcionites after their leader, Marcion. (90-91)

6

The affront, for Celsus, arises less from the mere accumulation of competing sects within the overall denomination of Christian than from the fact that, internally, this multiplicity reproduces the same intolerant disjunction that keeps Christians stubbornly apart from their civic fellows, thus opening a rift in the social fabric. "The various [Christian] parties have taken to condemning one another," Celsus reports, so that "despite their clinging proudly to their [common] name, in most other respects they are at odds" (70). The internal conflict thus acquires a dangerousness in the Celsian critique, as though it might readily spread, quite like an outbreak of plague, from "the secrecy and obscurity of their little club[s]" (117) to the civic world at large. Such a mimesis is already occurring, for it is necessary for Celsus to speak of the Christians' "systematic corruption of the truth" (91) and of their "perversions" (114) of the same, offenses which strike at the very noetic basis of ecumenical order. Both the uncooperative denial of theological relativism on which

the Christians insist and their own hypocritical fractiousness threaten to export to their neighbors a confusion in perception and understanding.

The Christians' obstinacy also reveals what Celsus sees as the power-play behind their seemingly simple-minded behavior. "Is it not precisely the sort of thing," writes Celsus in respect of the Christian position that only *their* God does genuine good, "that one would expect to hear from a magician, a sorcerer who is out only for his own gain, and teaching that his rival magicians are working their wonders by the power of evil, while he and he alone represents the power of good?" (99) Again, "it is petulance and the ambition for power that seems to determine the actions of the Christian God" (76) and by extension of the Christians themselves. If the Christians' disturbing claim to possess uniquely correct perceptions in the ordinary matter of good and evil violates the outward forms of propriety by which the Antonine world, in Brown's description of it, set such great store, then their quickness to "mutilate" (114) necessary ideas again attacks the established order in its very noetic substance.

III

So far I have been addressing that against which Celsus defines himself. But what about his positive belief, his own touted *True Doctrine*? Celsus maintains the Platonist vision of divinity. God is the Absolute Good of the *The Symposium* or the Ultimate Intelligence, beyond the Demiurge, of the *Timaeus;* God is the sunlike Logos in whose radiance all things become differentiated and intelligible. "What the sun is to visible things… so is God to intelligible things" (111). Christian literalism derails philosophical subtlety by displacing carefully differentiated concepts into gross figures: "A true son of God," writes Celsus, "like the sun that illuminated the world by first illuminating itself, ought first to have been revealed as a true god" (64). Had they insisted on no more than that Jesus was the son of God, or rather of *a* god, the Christians would not have exceeded traditional myth in plausibility or decorum.

Christian doctrine, however, offensively *mixes* the vocabularies of myth and philosophy; and where superstition is a threat that can only be kept at bay by philosophy – a tenet common to Platonism and Epicureanism so that it makes no difference to which camp Celsus at last belongs – this can only be interpreted as foretelling an epistemological disaster. "The Christians put forth this Jesus not only as the son of God but as the very Logos – not the pure and holy Logos known to the philosophers, mind you, but a new kind of Logos: A man who managed to get himself arrested and executed in the most humiliating circumstances" (64). Christian doctrine, according to Celsus, leads to "a general madness of beliefs" (111). Christian preaching, like the Bacchanalia suppressed during the time of the

Roman Republic or like the more recent and equally disturbing Rites of Cybele, “excite[s] [its] hearers to the point of frenzy with flute music” (71) while stuffing their ears with silly impossibilities and seductive notions. In discussing the origin of Christian doctrine in Jewish myth (the point being that Christianity is unoriginal), Celsus cites what to him is the absurdity of the serpent in the garden “prov[ing] himself superior to the wishes of God” (80). The Celsian point seems to be that the Christians themselves are snakelike, in addition to being wormlike, in that they seduce people, especially women, to false and destructive beliefs.

It is his Platonism, straight out of the *Timaeus,* however, that provokes Celsus to his central philosophical objection to Christian doctrine. No God-Logos would ever have descended out of the Empyrean into the grossness of the sublunary realm:

> God is that which is beautiful and happy and exists within himself in the most perfect of all conceivable states. This means that God is changeless. A God who comes down to men undergoes change – a change from good to bad; from beautiful to shameful; from happiness to misfortune; from what is perfect to what is wicked. Now what sort of a god would choose a change like that? (77-78)

> [The] God of the philosophers [by truthful contrast] is himself the underivable, the unnamable; he cannot be reached by reason. Such attributes as we may postulate of him are not the attributes of human nature, and all such attributes are quite distinct from his nature. He cannot be comprehended in terms of attributes or human experience, contrary to what the Christians teach; moreover, he is outside any emotional experience. (103-104)

Substituting anthropomorphic *change* for philosophic *changelessness,* the Christians thus dissolve the ontological category on which civic existence rests. To derive Jesus, via the Holy Spirit, from the Father God; to project divinity into mundanity; to attach attributes to the unattributable; and finally to assimilate contemplative calm to emotional frenzy: All of this subverts the Logos conceived of as a type of metaphysical agreement by which the many and distinct manifestations of the *philosophia perennis et universalis* evident in the teeming Imperial world can be reconciled as accents on a single antecedent utterance. Notice that all of the gestures, pragmatic and noetic, that Celsus condemns in the acts and thoughts of the Christians correspond to classic sacred crimes. They are profanations and

adulterations. Notice also that, for Celsus, the Logos insulted by Christian misthinking functions as the bedrock of *accord* on which the structures of universal political life have been built.

Like Prometheus laying his stealthy hands on Olympian fire, Christians have absconded with the central term of the tradition which Celsus wishes to sustain and must therefore defend. Appropriating and *mutilating* this central term, the Christians have replicated the shameful deed of an Odysseus in sacking the Palladium or of a Kronos in parricidally assaulting his Father, Ouranos. Of course, the Christians cannot really steal the philosophic Logos, which remains the noetic property of the philosophers; but they can do something much worse when considered from the perspective of a society still immersed in sacred categories, like the society of Celsus: They can *double* the Logos, thus marking it with the conflict that it is supposed to defer. It is this doubling that strikes Celsus as intolerable and which, as he sees it, bodes an enormity. In his vilifications as well as in his arguments, Celsus is in effect saying to the emergent double of the philosophical Logos of which he is the spokesman, “this town ain’t big enough for the both of us.” He is trying to nip a stichomythia in the bud, but of course one cannot do that, for one is already fully in the midst of the stichomythia when one tries.

Brown has written of the way in which the forms of agreement and limitation in Antonine society inhibited the outbreak of destructive *philotimia;* he has also emphasized that decorum among the elite peers of that society to some degree served to disguise the actual domination of all minor parties by one major party, that namely of the reigning Caesar. Controlling *philotimia* required, in other words, the tacit denial by all participants in the body social that a primary model of *philotimia* existed and that everyone else involuntarily must bend his knee to it; we control ours, so to speak, that the emperor might exercise his. The Logos of philosophers, praised by Celsus, is really in the last resort the Logos of the Empire and as such is the coercive Logos that holds opposites in place through intimidation and violence. It is coincidental but instructive that the probable reigning Caesar when Celsus wrote his diatribe was Marcus Aurelius, Stoic author of the placid *Meditations* and military pacifier of the Germanic marches. Was *On the True Doctrine* intended to persuade the Philosopher King? Marcus issued no edict of persecution that with certainty can be pinned on him, but he did express irritation with the Christians. His heirs to the Empire tended to be less placid in respect of the emergent faith, possibly because they were responding to the Celsian or similar cases. Commodus, Marcus’s son and immediate successor, was a sociopath who seized on any and every excuse to kill people. Origen’s refutation of Celsus, from the mid-Third Century, suggests that Celsus was still very much current and that he was, in some degree, influential.

IV

That, for Celsus, argument *as such* functions more or less a matter of decorum, is suggested by the remark at the beginning of *On the True Doctrine* that Christians live under a momentarily deferred death sentence, and again by the naked appeal to violence (let none of them live to marry or procreate) in the concluding section of the tract. The syllogism begins in philosophy and ends in *Faustrecht:*

> The wisest of the Greeks have said that even the human soul is allotted to gods from its birth; thus even we are to some extent under their control, and it is just as well if we do not slight them but rather do what we can to solicit their favor: The satraps or subordinate officers, not to mention the procurators who represent the Persian or Roman emperor – indeed even those who hold lesser offices – could make things very uncomfortable for anyone if they were slighted [as the Christians slight the gods]; and one should not expect the satraps and lieutenants of the earth and air to look kindly on the insults [of the new sect]. (118)

8

Celsus, who appears to have been a reasonably competent rhetorician, carefully imbricates his categories. The insidious thing about the passage just cited is the way in which it renders ambiguous the distinction between heavenly and earthly powers. Practically speaking, there is no distinction. After all, the emperor himself is a god, and "what you receive in life, you receive from him" (124), Celsus insists. In such a world, might is right in the manner *post hoc ergo propter hoc:* Thus "the men who tortured your god in person," says Celsus addressing the Christians directly, "suffered nothing in return; not then, nor as long as they lived" (119). The demonstration is pragmatic and theory follows the pragmata. The Christians allege, says Celsus, that their God suffered humiliation and torture because he willed to do so; but it would be just as easy to allege, and is indeed more plausible, that the traditional gods, not Jesus himself, willed the upstart's arrest and execution. "When one considers these things objectively, it is evident that the old gods are rather more effective in punishing blasphemers than is the god of the Christians, and those who blaspheme the former are usually caught and punished" (119-20). Celsus at last reveals the brutal reality which the Christians must assimilate if they desire not to feel the consequences:

> If they persist in refusing to worship the various gods who preside over the day-to-day activities of life, then they should not be permitted to live

> until marriageable age; they should not be permitted to marry, to have children, nor to do anything else over which a god presides. If they are going to marry, have children, and have a good time of it, taking the bad with the good as all men must, then they ought to pray to the beings who have made life possible for them. They should offer the appropriate sacrifices and say the proper prayers until such time as they are free of their earthly entanglements, and ingratiate themselves to the beings who control all spheres of human activity. It is at best ungrateful to use someone's flat and pay [him] no rent (as Christians do the earth). (123)

Stop trying to differentiate yourselves so conspicuously from all others, Celsus is saying; cease your dangerous, because inevitably conflictual, doubling of the existing society, symbolized in your doubling of that society's key term, "Logos"; and do so by imitating, if only verbally, the established forms that signify agreement and subordination. Do so, moreover, or incur the positive displeasure of the community and face a lethal consequence. In simultaneously demanding of the Christians that they imitate the social norm and cease imitating the social norm, *On the True Doctrine* lays open the great cognitive limit of antique thought, the inability to understand mimesis in any stable way and the consequent entrapment of the thinker within a system of coercive violence of the type that René Girard has deemed the scapegoat mechanism.

I will need to touch on what Girard means by "scapegoat mechanism," but I can begin by calling attention to the fact that the Celsian Christians are a scapegoat, as the term is readily understood in common parlance, and in a way which Brown's discussion of *philotimia* clarifies.

The Celsian case can be reduced essentially to the following: The many ethnic people apply their many competing names to the presumed singular God and there are many cults within the Empire; all of them potentially conflict with one another, except that a Logos, a rhetorical equivocation, has been found which reconciles them in the concept of their parity. Nevertheless, the *philotimia* intrinsic to each remains and is a source of danger. That same potentially explosive *philotimia* can be channeled productively, however, through the invocation on the social scene of a conspicuous singular cult which all at once boasts of its superiority to all others and is demonstrably, by reference to what everybody knows, inferior to them. The cults will find their unity increased through their common animosity towards Christianity. The Celsian vilification of Christianity allows us to link this philosophical and social strategy to a strand of fundamental sacred practice whose roots are prehistoric. For in styling the Christians as vermin, as sorcerers, as "thieves, burglars, poisoners, blasphemers of all descriptions, grave-robbers" (74), Celsus makes use of a

primordial vocabulary of execration which, in myth and ritual, invariably presages an expulsion or immolation.

Celsus even implies that Jesus was ugly (60), a typical characteristic attributed to those prone to be sacrificed. Indeed, *On the True Doctrine* makes the theoretical case, as one might nowadays say, for the conspicuous if not perfectly massive persecutions of the early Third Century, just as *Mein Kampf* made the theoretical case for the Holocaust, and just as Lenin's voluminous writings made the theoretical case for the extermination of the Kulaks. A scapegoat, according to Girard, is an internal, pre-differentiated, but otherwise arbitrarily selected *other* whose expulsion or immolation serves to polarize the general conflict in a society and re-establish it as a solidarity. In cases where the breakdown in need of repair results from the clash of parties represented by clearly distinguishable agents, or doubles, one of the doubles will likely become the scapegoat. (If not Teiresias or Creon, then Oedipus; if not Caesar, then Pompey.) Paradoxically, when examined from outside of the sacrificial thinking that condemns him, the victim appears not as *alien* to those who immolate him but as similar. The purpose of vilification, or of *myth* considered as an accusation, is to disguise similarity so as to facilitate the lynching.

9

Even as he pronounces damning judgment and threatens a massacre, I would like to stress, Celsus betrays no consciousness that he is offending against the placidity of his expressed ideals: He must seem to himself, judging by his text, to be making a genuinely philosophical point and publishing what strikes him as a sane social commentary; he even at one point urges that he has written his treatise for the "edification" of the Christians, that "they can see for themselves the true character of the doctrines they have chosen to embrace and the true source of their opinions" (54). Is there any epistemological ground for doubting the man's sincerity? Not even Origen seems to doubt it, whose lengthy retort preserves his antagonist's work for posterity. But always Celsus recommends violence in order to defer violence, as when he reasons that if everyone imitated the Christians, a general civic collapse would quickly ensue, and the barbarians would manifest themselves tomorrow not just at the gates but within the precincts of the city. In defending the "True Doctrine" (*Alethes Logos*) which Christianity would undo, Celsus frankly admits that, as Plato made clear, this teaching "cannot be put in words" (92).

Christianity's devolving of the Platonic godhead into the bodily figure of the carpenter Jesus thus strongly offends Celsus because that "ultimate reality" which constitutes both godhead and the good is, as Plato says in the *Phaedrus,* "colourless, formless, untouchable, and visible only to the mind that guides the soul in its quest for the true knowledge that inhabits this sphere" (Celsus 95). In a

startling way, the apologist for the “True Doctrine” has no doctrine; he only has an unspecifiable negative theology and a non-reflective practice, stemming semi-consciously from the pervasive fear of *philotimia,* and consisting of the maintenance of social cohesion through ritual expulsion of a victim.

René Girard has pointed out, in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978), that it is just this aspect of antique life to which Christianity responds through its withdrawal. The Logos of the Empire is the Logos of violence; the Logos of the Christians, however, “is foreign to any kind of violence,” as Girard writes, and “it is therefore forever expelled… The Johannine Logos discloses the truth of violence by having itself expelled” (271). One of the most baffling aspects of Christianity, for Celsus, is its refusal to engage in an explicit mimetic contest with its chief rival, the surrounding order, thereby proving its mettle. Celsus finds astonishment in the case that, if Jesus were God or *a* god, he did not smite those who abused him, for that is what gods habitually do. Thus Celsus holds the Christian admonition to “turn the other cheek” against Christianity on the grounds that it is an injunction stolen by them from the *Crito,* in which Platonic context he approves of it; but then he ignores Plato’s caution not to seek revenge, for he urges massive violence against the Christians in response to their alleged offenses (113). Here again I insist on the remarkable semi-consciousness of the Celsian thought processes. Plato was right to condemn vengeance *and* we should avenge ourselves on the Christians (A) for absconding with the insight and (B) for getting it wrong in their restatement. As Socrates would say, these two statements do not chime together very well at all.

Celsus is simply doing, in his metaphysical style, what resident alarmists had been doing since prehistory when they sensed the imminence of crisis, namely activating the scapegoat mechanism; but the Christians whom he relegates to disgusting worm-hood appear, on the other hand, to be doing something quite different. In Celsus’ time, this difference is not yet fully differentiated (nor need it ever be for us to understand it as a difference), and in their internal sectarian battles the Christians, as Celsus himself tells us, could be just as vehement as their oppressors; but one can detect an emergent particularity nevertheless, especially in the Christians’ withdrawal from the universal *philotimia* of the ecumene. “They are agreed,” Celsus writes, “that outsiders are not to be trusted and they they themselves must remain perpetual apostates from the approved religions” (70). Since converts are admitted, however, the Christian withdrawal cannot itself be characterized as expulsory: It establishes itself without emitting a victim.

This withdrawal can, in turn, be traced to insights present in Biblical, or monotheistic, narrative which are not present in Pagan, or polytheistic, narrative, of which the Celsian combination of Epicurean and Platonic discourse represents a

derivative species. As Eric Gans has written, in *The End of Culture* (1985), “what the biblical narrative accomplishes is the incarnation, in the figure of the ‘jealous’ monotheistic God, of an equilibrating reflection of human resentment, just as the more primitive divinities constitute similar reflections of human desire” (203). In this sense, the Celsian invocation of the God of the Philosophers is even less meaningful as an anodyne to Christian silliness, as an educated pagan undoubtedly saw it, than an invocation of Zeus would have been. As had Judaism before it, Christianity was replacing the scandal and relativism of many gods jealous of one another (because the followers of their cults were in *de facto* competition with one another) with the stability of a single God who, in Gans’s words, “is jealous of man but never envious of other gods” (205).

10

To the objection that the Celsian god might bear a similar description, I would quickly enjoin again what I have only just noted, that the Platonic indifference of the God of the Philosophers masks the human, all-too-human jealousy of the reigning Caesar and his *securitate.* The God of the Philosophers is a prettification. Show-trials and massacres must have brought this home to the victims and their survivors in a radically toughening way. Fox makes a relevant comment when he writes that the burgeoning of Christianity “coincided with a particular phase in the history of public entertainment,” namely gladiatorial spectacle, on the occasion of which Christians “were pitched into the cities’ arenas for unarmed combat with gladiators or bulls, leopards and the dreaded bears” (*Pagans and Christians* 420). Fox adds that “these displays were financed and chosen by the great men of the cities” (420) out of civic pride. Brown, in his study, notes that the voluntary redirection of private wealth into public display was one of the ways of controlling *philotimia,* hence of diffusing resentment. That we moderns respond to gladiation, persecution, and mass execution with automatic revulsion is a sign that our fundamental way of thinking differs decisively from the Late Antique Pagan, and that it derives, in this aspect at least, from the proletariat of the Antonine Age rather than from its political or intellectual aristocracy.

V

Of modern*istic* thought, however – of all thought which makes a theme of its own discontinuity with the Judaeo-Christian, or Theological, or “Logocentric” tradition – the same cannot be said. If something irreducibly anti-Roman and anti-metaphysical and anti-sacred marks Christianity, then something irreducibly anti-Christian marks modernism, defined as I am here defining it, as a reaction, or even to some extent as an atavism, a return to Celsian rancor: Thus Voltaire, in the chapter on Christianity in his *Dictionnaire* (1764), devotes a prominent page to the apocryphal

contest-by-levitation between Simon Magus and Saint Peter in Rome before the emperor Nero and blandly records the hair-splitting doctrinal disputes of the early centuries as though these signified the new religion essentially. No wonder, Voltaire seems to be saying implicitly, that Nero casually proscribed the new cult. Who wouldn't have?

Voltaire's contemporary, Edward Gibbon, whose description of the Severan chapel I earlier quoted, blamed the fall of the Empire on the rise of Christianity. In fact, in respect of Alexander Severus, Gibbon opined that "the philosophic devotion of that emperor was marked by a singular and injudicious regard for the Christian religion" (quoted in Toynbee *A Study of History* [V 549]). For Gibbon, like Celsus, the supportable theological relativism encompasses Zeus, Orpheus, and Apollonius, but not Jesus, the inassimilable alien element. Modernist thinking brings other charges. "Christianity robbed us of the harvest of the culture of the ancient world" (183), writes Nietzsche a century later than Gibbon in his *Anti-Christ* (1886); "covert revengefulness, petty envy became *master!* Everything pitiful, everything suffering from itself, everything tormented by base feelings, the whole *ghetto-world* of the soul suddenly on top!" (183).

How amazingly like the Celsian is the Nietzschean anti-Christianism, or indeed how amazingly is Celsus like a proleptic Nietzsche! It is almost as though no time had elapsed from one to the other so that they are together one voice making one argument from the same irate perspective! Nietzsche even shouts *worm!* not once but twice. "Christianity is a revolt of everything that crawls along the ground directed against that which is *elevated:* the gospel of the 'lowly' *makes* low…" (157); Nietzsche meanwhile styles the early Christians as a mass of "stealthy vermin which, shrouded in night, fog and ambiguity, crept up to every individual and sucked seriousness for *real* things, the instinct for *realities* of any kind, out of him" (180), thus undermining the robustness of Hellenism and depriving posterity of the fruits that Hellenism would otherwise have borne. We of the modern present are still the victims of the Christian trespass, still the sufferers of ancient vampirism, and Nietzsche, like Celsus, has his own "True Doctrine" to proffer as an anodyne.

For Nietzsche, as for Celsus, Christianity represents cultural decadence merged with a devastating power of mimesis. Christianity seduces sufferers through the theme of *"pity"* (118), exacerbates the suffering, and spreads from one susceptible victim to the next: "The loss of force which life has already sustained through suffering is increased and multiplied even further by pity. Suffering itself becomes contagious through pity; sometimes it can bring about a collective loss of life and life-energy which stands in an absurd relation to the quantum of its cause" (118). Pity, says Nietzsche, "thwarts the law of evolution" (118) and sacrifices the higher type to the lower, the least fitted to survive to the best. Pity, finally, is a nihilism which

“persuades to *nothingness!*” (118). Taking the Pagan side by assuming the superior insight of Aristotle, Nietzsche notes that the Greeks understood pity as a poison to be concentrated and expelled through the therapy of the drama (119). Again like Celsus, Nietzsche recoils at the weakness and foolishness of a god – or rather an image of god – who disdains to assert himself as an unequivocal potentate. This entails, moreover, Nietzsche’s implicit acceptance of a plurality of tribal gods, each sufficient unto its cause. “A people which still believes in itself also has its own God. In him it venerates the conditions through which it has prospered, its virtues – it projects its joy in itself, its feeling of power on to a being whom one can thank for them” (126). God enfigures a people’s power; not its moral but its effective power. To Christianity one must charge “the *anti-natural* castration of a God into a God of the merely good” (126), a construction paralleling the Celsian claim that Christianity *mutilates* proper ideas. In a typically Nietzschean gesture, the point resurfaces as the topic of an irate consummation:

11

> The Christian conception of God – God as the God of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit – is one of the most corrupt conceptions of God arrived at on earth: Perhaps it even represents the low-water mark in the descending development of the God type. God degenerated into the *contradiction of life,* instead of being its transfiguration and eternal *Yes!* In God a declaration of hostility towards life, nature, the will to life! God the formula for every calumny of “this world,” for every lie about “the next world!” In God nothingness deified, the will to nothingness sanctified!… (128)

On the other hand, in the midst of his calumny, Nietzsche often understands Christianity with a clairvoyance that none of his modernist successors – and today they are legion – can reproduce. Nietzsche rejects, for example, the Romantic notion, typified by Renan, that makes of Jesus a genius-hero in battle against his foes. Impossible, writes Nietzsche, because Jesus is “precisely the opposite of all contending, of all feeling oneself in struggle” (141). Again like Celsus, Nietzsche identifies the keystone of Christian difference to be the injunction to “resist not evil!” (141), which however he regards as a morbid “incapacity” (141), not a strength. The pernicious effect of this peculiarly Christian Logos, moreover, is that through it and because of it “everyone is equal to everyone else” (141), as Nietzsche bitterly says.

In his treatment of Jesus, Nietzsche unlike Celsus begins to exhibit a certain measure of admiration; in his judgment Jesus really is unparalleled and without

precedent (“a new way of living, *not* a new belief” [146]) in the radicality of his withdrawal from every established precept of social order and propriety. But once having established the uniqueness of Christ, Nietzsche then echoes Celsus again in his claim that, in their crude and erroneous attempt to understand the Master, the Apostles utterly misunderstood Him. The vulgarity of Jesus’ contemporaries “must in any case have *coarsened* the type: The first disciples in particular had to translate a being immersed entirely in symbols and incomprehensibilities into their own crudity in order to understand anything of it at all – for them such a type could not *exist* until it had been reduced to more familiar terms” (142-143). Celsus objected that no true god would ever “come down” and besmirch himself in matter. Nietzsche is saying that the low-grade intelligence of the “first disciples” besmirched a rare entity by incarnating him in cheap figures and vulgar fabliaux and by dragging him into an *existence* incommensurate with his essence. Notice how Nietzsche refashions the genuinely transcendental transcendentalism of Platonic thinking into an “immanent transcendentalism” all his own and how, in doing so, he neatly reproduces Greek thinking for the selfsame modernism which, superficially, rejects Greek thinking.

The intellectual failure of the “first disciples” set the pattern for Christianity as “the history of [a] progressively cruder misunderstanding of an *original* symbolism” (149). Here once more Nietzsche’s case runs in parallel with Celsus’ case. In the latter, one finds the complaint, which I have cited, that Christianity at once depends on other cults for its stock of themes and orients itself exclusively toward the lowest elements of the society. Christ is simply a plagiarism on figures of greater antiquity and authenticity like “Zalmoxis… Pythagoras… Rhampsinitus… Orpheus… Protesilaus… Herakles… or Theseus.” In Nietzsche, too, we read that Christianity “absorbed the doctrines and rites of every *subterranean* cult of the *Imperium Romanum,”* and, along with these rites, “the absurdities of every sort of morbid reason” (149). Christianity employs magic because magic appeals to “the dross and refuse of mankind” (156) that the early Christian leaders chose to recruit. The Gospels should not be regarded as an “evangel,” Nietzsche protests, but as a *“dysangel”* (151). To this extent, indeed, Nietzsche can boast that *“in fact, there have been no Christians”*(151) save for the first and only Christian, or Jesus himself.

There might be one exception to the rule, however, and that would be, by an irony which Nietzsche calculatedly forces, Nietzsche himself, for if his discovery about the absolutely *nonpareil* status of the Redeemer is correct, then Nietzsche alone in two thousand years has really penetrated to the kernel of the Christ Phenomenon. It becomes clearer, the further one reads in *The Anti-Christ,* that Nietzsche is making himself the *double* of Jesus; and it is just at this point in the Nietzschean narrative that the Author-As-Anti-Christ begins to make a theme of what Nietzsche names, using the French word, *ressentiment.* Resentment, in Nietzsche’s usage, refers to

the subjective impression that life and being lie elsewhere than in the self and belong to someone else. To the extent that one cannot appropriate that life and being from the other, one contents oneself with denigrating it. Resentment as denigration serves the purpose, to use the modern phrase, of feeling good about oneself even when all the facts indicate that one ought to feel otherwise.

It is important to note that for Nietzsche, the death on the cross represents the Redeemer's "freedom from [and] superiority over *ressentiment"* (153), so that the depiction of Calvary as a triumph completely betrays the meaning of the act; but in the hearts of the disciples, who interpreted Calvary as the defeat of a movement, "precisely the most unevangelic of feelings, *revengefulness,* again became uppermost" (153) in the aftermath of the crucifixion, as Nietzsche argues. From that moment on, it was the resentment of the defeated, of the outcast, and of the untouchable, against the strength of the Empire, embodied in *its* gods, that fed and informed Christianity, a term which Nietzsche places implicitly in quotes.

12

This line of reasoning is well known also from *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil,* where Nietzsche expounded his analysis of Judaeo-Christian morality as slave-morality, in which all reigning values undergo reversal for the rhetorical purpose of disguising the ineffectuality of the ineffectual, the weakness of the weak, and the lack of cleverness of the unlettered. Yet in the early period of Christianity – the second and third centuries – before the religion gained official status, the behavior of the Christians does not appear to have constituted a deliberate challenge to the Imperial order but, rather, a withdrawal from it. That the Imperial order interpreted this withdrawal as a deliberate challenge does not make of it a deliberate challenge. Even the behavior of the martyrs is pacifistic. Fox, among others, notes that there is no record of Christians of the period seeking revenge on their persecutors. The question ought to be posed, therefore, of*whose* resentment has provoked such ire in Nietzsche – and in his successors.

If the radiant gist of Christian Revelation is, as Eric Gans has written apropos of Paul's conversion in *Science & Faith* (1990), the fact that "faith and persecution are one" (87), that "to know Jesus is to have participated in the crucifixion" (87), then one cannot achieve an assimilation of the message by the mere inversion of the paradigmatic all-against-one expulsory structure of the death on the cross. Yet this is what Nietzsche does in *The Anti-Christ.* Thus, starting with a general objection to Christianity, Nietzsche then extracts a revalued Jesus from the Gospel account and revises the general objection so that it refers specifically, not to the philosophically purified Jesus, that compound of symbols and *nonpareil* abstractions, but to the rabble who misunderstood and falsified their Master: "One would no more wish to

associate with ‘first Christians,'” writes Nietzsche, “than one would with Polish Jews… Neither of them smell very pleasant” (161). Christianity is so much “ill-smelling Jewish acidity compounded of rabbinism and superstition” (175). No invocation of “irony” can neutralize these and other examples of vilifying dismissal, of the rhetoric of immolation, in Nietzsche’s book. Nor does Nietzsche’s taking sides with the revalued Jesus absolve him of the charge of intense resentment against Christianity, for this Jesus is as atheological as Nietzsche himself: He resembles, as I have already commented, the Platonic Godhead of Celsus’ platitudinous negative theology; he also resembles Nietzsche’s own counter-scriptural Anti-Christ, Zarathustra, a point that Nietzsche makes clear by alluding to his own text (171).

In fact, in these very operations, Nietzsche commits an error which, when he identifies it in Kant, he deplores. He makes of Jesus a *Ding-an-Sich* quite as unknowable as the *Deus Absconditus* of the Neoplatonists and other negative theologians and then, in effect, he makes himself the impossible revealer of this unfathomable being. But what epistemological basis is there for any of Nietzsche’s speculations about the esoteric Jesus? Of course, there is none. Nietzsche has in fact fallen into an ancient and sacrificial logic from which a less dogmatically skeptical approach to the Gospels might have rescued him: He has succumbed to the lure of the numinous center and has entered into rivalry, not just with the evangels of Jesus, but with Jesus himself; he has then uttered a book-length sequence of antiquated denunciations aimed against Christians and Jews alike, blasting them as though he were Zeus and they mere arrogant godlings. And in this, Nietzsche compounds his error, blatantly so, for he violates a principle that he lays down in *The Anti-Christ* itself, and which I adduced at the beginning of my argument, using my own language. “The world-historical stupidity of all persecutors has lain precisely in their giving their opponents the appearance of honourableness -in bestowing on them the fascination of martyrdom” (171).

Even supposing that Nietzsche had divined the “true Jesus” behind the “false Jesus” reported in the Gospels, what difference would it make to the fact of historical Christianity? Very little. Quite aside from falling into the role of a mythic *deletor,* Nietzsche is arguing for a specious “True Doctrine” as against the effectiveness of an image, and the image, firmly ensconced in the Gospels, is so effective that, so to speak, it might as well be the reality.

Much of contemporary Jesus scholarship seems to me to be susceptible to the same criticism. While I would not be so naive as to comment on the erudition of a Barbara Thiering or a Burton Mack, I do feel justified in pointing out that their insistence on a “real Jesus” behind the “false” one makes them reminiscent of Nietzsche. More than this, each exhibits a certain animus against – what shall we call it? – the *received,* or better yet the *effective,* Jesus, or simply the Jesus of the Gospels. The ordinary,

household-variety Jesus. Thiering shows an obsessive need to de-divinize Jesus and to de-Christianize Him, using her *"pesher"* technique of interpretation to transfer Jerusalem to Wadi-Qum-Ran, rescue Jesus from the Crucifixion (thus sparing him the embarrassing necessity of resurrection), and spirit him off to "a Herodian estate in the south of France" (*Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls* 160), where he dies in Gnostic serenity at the ripe age of seventy in 64 A.D. For Thiering, then, the Christianity rooted in the notion of the Death-and-Resurrection is a falsehood; the pacifist teacher and great spirit may be retained, but anything smacking of the supernatural must be discarded. For a summation of Mack's attitude, I cite a recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly.* Mack outlined his "next project" to the journalist, which would entail, he said:

> Putting together a scholarly consortium that would "redescribe" Christian origins in some way other than through the Gospel narratives and their "crucifixion drama," as he calls it. Because Q [the putative pre-Gospel source of the Gospels] contains no passion narrative, Mack believes that no one really knows how Jesus died and that the Gospel stories of his passion, like most of the other Gospel stories, are pure fiction. […] "It's over," Mack said. "We've had enough apocalypses. We've had enough martyrs. Christianity has had a two-thousand-year run, and it's over." (67)

To which one is tempted to add, *"thus spake Zarathustra!"* But a scholarly "redescription" which corrects Christianity's vulgar and dangerous view of itself is only another way of pronouncing the name of Celsus, who under the sign of philosophical refinement remarked that the world would be better off with the Platonic uncontaminated God than with the Gospel God who descended into the sublunary muck. One need not say that the God of the philosophers could never have become the foundation of a universal religion; one need only say that it did not and that this fact radically lessens the possibility that it might have. The potential for millennial popularity of an academic non-god – a veritable "Q-Being" – must be even more minuscule. *Pace* Mack, there have been no further genuine apocalypses in the Western tradition since Saul's vision on the road to Damascus, and indeed the proclaimed revelations, Joachim of Flora's and Karl Marx's and Friedrich Nietzsche's, all have about them something distinctly anti-Gospel and anti-Biblical; they are intellectual attempts to subvert the massive extra-intellectual authority of the revelation that "took." None has been more than transient and at least two have generated enormous misery. If the objection were posed that the Gospels have caused misery too, in that the partisans of this or that interpretation of them have made war on each other, I would add that such war-making, since it abrogates the injunction to abjure violence, can hardly be laid to the Gospels

themselves.

What was the truth that Paul understood and that Celsus might have understood, too, in his imperfect way, so that his resentment against the Gospel revelation was his response to it? I quote once again my friend Eric Gans, who has written so perceptively about the anthropology of revelation: “The truth that Saul understands, the power of which is figured in the text by his blinding, is that it is the persecution of the person Jesus that guarantees his presence beyond death and thus demonstrates his divinity. Saul intuits a fundamental connection between persecution and divinization. That the text fails to elaborate this connection, or that Paul’s own writings explore it only indirectly, should hardly surprise us” (*Science & Faith* 89). Gans adds, in words which apply to the attitude of a Celsus or a Nietzsche or a Mack, that “the high point of revelation is expressed in words that bear the mark of authority precisely because they cannot be explained. In such moments the language of the human subject confronts him as the vehicle of an originary intuition that he would be unable to explain in conceptual terms” (89). This intuition, in Gans’s terms, is the originary equality of human beings, or moral reciprocity, an intuition which necessarily affronts a vision as hierarchical in essence as that of Celsus or Nietzsche or Mack, each of which sees himself as the vindicator of a pure as against a contaminated vision. But the Pauline vision, with great force, insists on dragging the extraordinary back down to the level of the ordinary, the liberator back down the the level of the persecutor. Everyone is a *varmint,* capable of persecution, unless possibly, in the simplest terms, someone reveals to him the human tendency to persecution. Resentment, like hypocrisy, is an honor granted by duplicity to the truth. I suggest in conclusion, and as an non-believer, that the resentment perennially aroused by Christianity and by the prior Hebrew revelation together is the sign of their continuing effectiveness in a post-Pagan world in which there is no “other” revelation and in which all attempted counter-revelations will remain absolutely derivative.

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