The Formation of Christendom

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BASIL BLACKWELL

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I have not always taken the advice or accepted the opinions generously offered. Nor, despite this help, have all the problems raised by my research been resolved. But they remain in the text as evidence of my own fallibility, and perhaps occasionally as testimony to the never-concluding and even irresolvable nature of historical investigation.

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Introduction

THE CHRISTIAN way of dating by numbering years from the Incarnation, "in the Year of the Lord," *Anno Domini* (A.D.), is perhaps the only such chronology currently recognised throughout the world. But while A.D. dating takes the birth of Jesus of Nazareth as its starting point, the system itself only came into use much later. For many centuries Christians continued to use pagan and Jewish chronologies and dates. This was a natural consequence of their Judaic inheritance, which provided them with a timescale stretching back to the Garden of Eden. The Old Testament embodied a millenial eschatology, in which the years of the world *Anni Mundi* (A.M.) linked Jews and Christians to the divine act of Creation, recorded in the Book of Genesis.

The method of counting by generations was also a common one, and it too bore Biblical authority from the First Book of Chronicles: "So all Israel were reckoned by genealogies . . ." (1 Chr. 9.1). For dates in their own lives, the early Christians used some of the many Greco-Roman methods then current: the regnal year of emperor or local ruler; the succession of Roman consuls; or the ancient four-year cycle of Olympiads, going back to the first pan-Hellenic games held at Olympia in Southern Greece. A plethora of local eras were in use; in Spain, the Roman conquest of 40 B.C. was commemorated through a distinctive *aera*; in Syria, the Seleucid era persisted. Later, the accession of Diocletian in A.D. 284 became the starting point of an era widely used in Egypt. Another novel system introduced under the same emperor, originally for taxation purposes, became very widespread: the fifteen-year cycle of indictions. Similarly, not only did the early Christians use the pagan months as we still do, but in areas subject to intensive Roman influence they also identified days of the month in the manner established by Julius Caesar, counting back from the Kalends, Nones, and Ides. With such a variety of dating methods available, it is not surprising that the followers of Jesus did not consider the introduction of another one. In any case, they were not concerned to document the present as much as to prepare for the future. For the transitory nature of life on earth had been emphasised, and they knew that the Second Coming (*Parousia*) and Day of Judgement were at hand.

From an early stage in their debates with the pagans, however, the Christians were concerned to prove the antiquity of their faith relative to secular history. In the early third century, Sextus Julianus Africanus set out

to demonstrate the superiority of the Judaeo-Christian faith by fitting the established events of ancient Persian and Greek chronology into the record of the Old Testament. A Christian chronographer of the Alexandrian school working in Palestine, Africanus took the Bible as the record of a preconceived destiny being worked out according to divine dispensation. Calculating the years of the world since the creation of Adam, and using as a model the seven days of Creation and the 70 weeks of the Book of Daniel, he united all world history in seven millenia: the first five covered Biblical history from Creation to the Babylonian captivity (A.M. 1-4999); the sixth consisted of 500 years of preparation for the advent of Christ—dated to the symbolic mid-point at A.M. 5500—and 500 years of subsequent Christian history that would end with the sixth millenium in A.M. 5999. The year 6000 would witness the Second Coming and the Apocalypse described in the Book of Revelations. It would usher in the seventh and final millenium of the Kingdom of Heaven. This chiliastic account of human history established fixed points for Christians: the date of the birth of Jesus, and the precise moment at which the *Parousia* would occur. It thereby provided a clear eschatology of Christian existence, and countered pagan predictions that the Christian faith would endure for only 365 years (a claim St. Augustine was pleased to see refuted).

From the early third century, therefore, the notion of a Christian age had been established, although its dates continued to be recorded in the year of the world. Africanus provided the basis for an even more elaborate demonstration of Christian superiority in historical chronology, drawn up one hunded years later by Eusebios of Caesarea. Eusebios refused to try and calculate the precise number of years between Creation and the Flood, because the Old Testament evidence was too scanty, and differed with Africanus over the precise date of the birth of Jesus, which he realised was out by two years. Nonetheless he retained both the millenial system and the symbolic mid-point of the sixth millenium as the hinge between all time before Christ and the remaining 500 years after Him. The chronology and canon tables established by Eusebios summarised the most sophisticated understanding of Christian history at that time and were translated from Greek into both Armenian and Latin soon after their completion.

The year of the world 6000 came and went, however, without change, despite Christian expectations of the Day of Judgement. The *Parousia* had obviously been delayed. Christians were instructed not to reduce their preparations for what might occur at any moment, but the millenial point had passed, and inevitably the theories of Africanus lost some of their authority.

Only 25 years later (in "A.M. 6025"), an eastern monk named Dionysios saw a way of drawing upon the chronology developed by Africanus to re-

name the Christian era and to identify it by "the years of the Lord," *Anni Domini*. He had been asked by a friend, a western bishop, to explain the complex problems of computation involved in calculating the date of Easter by the Alexandrian method. The task of establishing the correct date for this, the most important moveable festival of the church, had previously been entrusted to the Church of Alexandria by the First Oecumenical Council at Nicaea (325). So Dionysios translated into Latin the authoritative Easter tables drawn up by St. Cyril in the middle of the fifth century, together with the computistic canons and methods of calculation used in the East. As he worked on his own tables for the future celebration of Easter, projected through a 95-year period, he realised that 28 nineteen-year cycles would soon have passed since the year traditionally attributed to the birth of Christ. He was able to conclude that he was living in the 525th year since the Incarnation. He had found a system that would allow a truly Christian calendar to be elaborated, and rejoiced that he would no longer have to use one that commemorated Diocletian, the pagan persecutor of the Christians.

Dionysios's Easter tables, and with them the possibility of using A.D. dating, remained relatively unknown, despite initial papal enthusiasm. The untimely death of Pope John I in May 526 unleashed an anti-Greek reaction in Rome that was responsible for the death of Boethius and the disgrace of his eastern associates, among them Dionysios. The Christian system of dating that we use today was another of the casualties, for Rome had long harboured hostility towards the powerful see of Alexandria. Although Dionysios's manuscript on Easter calculation passed to Cassiodorus, who described how to convert A.M. dates to A.D. dates, there was no shift to dating from the Incarnation, even at the famous monastery founded by Cassiodorus at Vivarium.

It was nearly two hundred years, in fact, before the system was put into regular use, and then by Bede, an Anglo-Saxon monk in remote Northumbria. His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in A.D. 731, is dated throughout by years reckoned from the Incarnation, coupled with the regnal years of local and more distant rulers. Although Bede was an expert at computation and chronology, as his own Easter tables show, he remained quite unknown in the East and without influence there. In the West, however, he was quickly followed. Many eighth-century chronicles adopted the same method of dating, and Charles the Great, known to us as Charlemagne, made the system familiar in many parts of Europe by using it for some of his acts of government.

Meanwhile, in the Greek East, the Byzantines adopted the system of dating from the Incarnation, but only side-by-side with ancient systems, which remained dominant. Old Testament chronology in the form elabo-

rated by Eusebios continued to date universal history by the year of the
world, while the year of the emperor reigning in Constantinople and the
15-year indiction cycle served to identify more recent events. In Rome the
ecclesiastical authorities continued to use traditional methods, also dating
their documents by indiction and imperial year, until the middle of the
eighth century. And when they did change, it was not to the A.D. method
exclusively; they substituted the year of Charles's rule for the Byzantine
imperial year, adding the pontifical year also. Secular dates thus remained
the norm in Rome, even if these became firmly axed on the realities of west-
ern power, while the A.D. system was gradually becoming established in
much of northern Europe.

In striking contrast to this lengthy process of devising and implement-
ing a Christian dating system independent of any ruler, Islam found its
own particular method within a decade of the Prophet's death in A.D. 632.
Muslim society took Muhammad's flight (Hijri) from Mecca to Medina as
the basis of its new calendar. The year of the Hijri (A.H.), complete with
its lunar months adapted from the Jewish system but renamed in Arabic,
was introduced. It remains a chronology employed in many parts of the
world today.

The emergence of an Islamic dating system was thus as brief and intense
as the Christian was extended and disrupted. Yet these two world calendars
were first diffused as authoritative methods of counting the years in the
same period: the tumultuous centuries that span the transition between the
late Roman and early medieval epochs. Modern times began in those dark
ages—and not only with respect to our present styles of dating.[1]

EVER SINCE the seminal work of Henri Pirenne on the consequences of the
eruption of Islam, the seventh century has been recognised as decisive in
the development of the Middle Ages.[2] Despite the paucity of evidence,
which does not facilitate close investigation, it is clear that the political
unity of the Mediterranean world was irrevocably lost at that time. Roman
imperial forms of government, often adapted to novel purposes in the non-

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[1] E. J. Bickermann, *Chronology of the Ancient World*, 2nd ed. (London, 1980); J. H.
Breasted, "The Beginnings of Time-Measurement and the Origins of Our Calendar," in
Time and Its Mysteries, 1st series (New York, 1935), 59-94; J. T. Shotwell, "Time and His-
torical Perspective," in *Time and Its Mysteries*, 3rd series (New York, 1949), 63-91. Cf.
R. L. Poole, *Medieval Reckonings of Time* (London, 1918), a very brief and useful introduc-
tion, and his *Studies in Chronology and History* (Oxford, 1934).

[2] See particularly Henri Pirenne, *Mohammad and Charlemagne* (London, 1939), and idem,
Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe (London, 1936), both volumes frequently re-
printed since.

Roman kingdoms of the West, began to give way to medieval ones. In particular, the rise of feudalism distinguished western Europe from the two other successors of ancient Rome: Byzantium and the Caliphate. The tripartite division has been of lasting significance for the modern world, and it is in the interaction of the three component parts that the initial particularity of the West can be located. I cannot resolve, nor have I addressed, the "structural dynamic" of this transition to feudalism.[3] An adequate historical theory will probably need to be articulated within a much broader framework of comparison, which will also identify patterns of imperial decline and succession, for example, in China, India, and Japan. But by investigating the transformation of the ancient world in its entirety and the three heirs of Rome in their shared Mediterranean context, I have tried to expand the empirical base for further theoretical work.

Although political and economic elements of the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages may be determinate, they are here subordinated to a study of the development of Christian faith. This is approached not through the well-known features of ecclesiastical history, but through an analysis of medieval faith as a material force. Nor do I begin with the physical substance of the church, its properties, its accumulated wealth, and its economic role in dispensing charity, which will form the subject of a companion volume. The following study will, instead, examine the structural role of faith in early medieval society. It may appear perverse to tackle the cultural parameters of Christendom before its economic dimension. But the capacity of faith to mobilise, frequently manifested in the seventh and eighth centuries, is indicative of a force that may determine other factors, particularly at times of political failure and economic crisis.

Belief is often taken for granted as a given fact, whose characteristics can be assumed at all levels of society, the most sophisticated and least educated. Rather than make that assumption, I prefer to try and examine the meanings of belief for early medieval believers. This is a delicate business not only because of the inherent difficulty of grasping the significance of faith for people so distant from us, but also because medieval religion is sometimes conceived, and criticised, as the chief support of an unchanging and fixed social order. While beliefs certainly did unite and restrict medieval Christendom, they seem to me infinitely more complex than they are often thought. There are a great many subversive aspects to belief, and medieval culture was more varied than ecclesiastical leaders cared to admit. So

[3] P. Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1974); C. Wickham, "The Other Transition: From the Ancient World to Feudalism," *Past and Present* 103 (1984): 3-36.

I make no apology for studying religion from the viewpoint of a non-believer; the history of faith is far too important to be left to adherents alone.

The Formation of Christendom addresses both the Christian and the Muslim inheritors of the Roman Empire and asks how it was that they came to define their world solely in religious terms. As the ancient world collapsed, faith rather than imperial rule became the feature that identified the universe, what Christians called the *oikoumene*, and Muslims, *Dar al Islam*. Religion had fused the political, social, and cultural into self-contained systems, separated by their differences of faith. Other regions beyond these spheres were of course known, but were branded as barbarian, pagan, heretical, and hence inferior. Such groups might even intrude into the Christian and Islamic worlds, as the Jewish communities did, always condemned and only tolerated under certain conditions. Paradoxically, however, Christianity, and in its turn, Islam, was formed in reaction to other faiths and creeds, Judaism primarily, but also the cults of pagan Greece and Rome, the panoply of Egyptian deities, Persian Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, and others. The history of the growth of Christian faith at the expense of these, and then of Islam in reaction to Christian as well as Judaic practice, does not require another general study. Instead of assuming a universal potential within the first Christian communities of the East Mediterranean, where Islam now predominates, I have asked how Christianity developed a dominant position and status in Europe, of which the term Christendom could justifiably be used. Concomitantly, I have looked closely at the religious rivalry that resulted in the transfer to Muslim allegiance of those areas where Christianity first flourished.

The term "Christendom" is recorded in late ninth-century Anglo-Saxon England and has no exact parallel in the Latin or Greek words used previously to designate Christian adherence, *Christianitas* or *oikoumene*.[4] It thus enters European vocabulary at the time when King Alfred was translating works of Augustine, Boethius, and Pope Gregory the Great into Anglo-Saxon. But this first known use does not reflect the reality of the late ninth century, a troubled period of Viking raids, which familiarised Christians in the West with Nordic paganism. On the contrary, the Anglo-Saxon concept of Christendom derives from an earlier period, when Charles the Great created a notion of Christian universality in his Holy Roman Empire.[5]

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[4] "Cristendome" is used by Alfred himself in 893 (in his revisions of the *World History* by Orosius), see *A New English Dictionary*, ed. J. A. H. Murray (Oxford, 1893), II(i). Contemporary twentieth-century use continues this meaning, "the state or condition of being Christian"; see, for instance, B. A. Gerrish, ed., *The Faith of Christendom* (Cleveland/New York, 1963).

[5] See J. Fischer, *Oriens, Occidens, Europa* (Wiesbaden, 1957), 78-79, on the equivalence of *orbis-mundis* and *orbis-ecclesia* in the late eighth century.

In this analysis of faith and the struggle between Christianity and Islam, the Muslim challenge is crucial, because it threatened the legitimacy of both the theological and political dimensions of Christianity. Although Christian authorities might identify Muhammad as another heretic, albeit with an extremely large and devout following, his claims to be the ultimate prophet of God explicitly contested the orthodoxy of their own faith. Islam was proposed to believers as the strict observance of monotheism: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet," as the Muslim profession of faith states. Like Christianity, it broke from the primitive, tribal claims of the Israelites, while it too recognised the enduring force of Mosaic Law. Islam, however, insisted upon a monotheism unconfused by Trinitarian problems. Both faiths believed in the same God, and each claimed to fulfil the promises of the Jewish Old Testament: Christians through the New Testament, which proclaimed the Messiah and spread the faith among Jews and Gentiles alike; Muslims through the Koran, which identified Muhammad as the final prophet of God, whose instructions replaced all previous ones.

The extent to which Islam considered that it had surpassed both the older religions is symbolised by the building of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. On the site of the Temple Mount, the holiest of Jewish holy places, Caliph Abd al Malik commissioned a mosque over the rock from which Muhammad had ascended into heaven. The octagonal building, constructed in white marble with reused Roman columns and decorated in glittering floral mosaics by Christian craftsmen, is surmounted by a golden dome typical of classical and early Christian architecture. According to the long Koranic inscription that runs around the interior, it was completed in A.H. 71 (A.D. 691-92) as a celebration of Allah, the God of both Jews and Gentiles who now favoured the Muslims above all others.

It was under the impact of these Islamic claims that Christians developed new means to ensure their survival. They also abandoned several pagan features inherited from the ancient world and adopted Christian ones—the introduction of dating from the Incarnation being an outstanding example. The simultaneous emergence of Islamic and Christian calendars was no coincidence. In rejecting Muslim belief, however, the eastern and western churches redefined their faith in different ways. Faced with Islamic monotheism, they each attempted to regulate their Christian belief and practice in accordance with their own interpretation of the Old Testament. In the East, the entirely novel doctrine of iconoclasm was elaborated, as a means of preventing the worship of man-made objects, to be replaced forty years later by the elevation of icons to an integrated position within worship. In the West, both the destruction and the veneration of religious pictures was condemned by the emergent Christian leadership of northern

Europe, where Charles was identified as a New David and his subjects as a New Israel. The division of Christendom, marked by the synod of Frankfurt in 794, finalised a long tendency towards separation, and set the churches of West and East on different courses.

Long before Muhammad began dictating his revelations, however, internal factors had confirmed tendencies towards a division of the ancient world. To draw attention to those elements, linguistic, cultural, and artistic, that separated East from West, is not to deny the unity of the Mediterranean. Following Braudel's magisterial work it is impossible to ignore the special environment shared by those regions united under imperial rule around the Roman lake.[6] Within this fixed physical framework, marked by a common pattern of ancient structures and systems of belief, parallel and simultaneous but distinct processes were responsible for the development of three particular heirs: the reconstituted empire of the East, the Arabic Caliphate of the South, and the self-conscious unit of western "Europe"— the modern sense attached to this term originates at the time of Charles the Great. Despite the lasting divisions established by the year A.D. 800, these regions remained bound together by their shared inheritance as well as by their geographical setting. Precisely because these bonds were real, there were constant attempts to recreate a past unity, attempts as varied as the movements for political union usually based on crusading force, or those for religious union based on theological compromise.

Throughout the following study, the terms "East" and "West" are used as a shorthand for the Greek regions of the eastern Mediterranean and the Latin areas of the West respectively.[7] These terms are of course Eurocentric. But they correspond roughly to the regions where the two major classical languages were spoken. Their meaning is fairly clear, they are in widespread use today, and I have not found any better general designations. The historian, after all, can try to allow for, but should not seek to escape, her time.

Linguistic factors held the key to the process of differentiation between an "Eastern" and a "Western" sphere during the early Christian period. For as the unity of the Mediterranean became less meaningful to its inhabitants, East and West were locked into ever-increasing mutual incomprehension. In the first great history of the faith by Eusebios (263-340), the Christian church is always singular, yet the existence of many churches formed by Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire, and their geographical separation, is recognised. Eusebios himself personified the Greek

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[6] F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (London, 1972-73), 2:763-71.

[7] Fischer, *Oriens*, 26-39.