

GATHERING THOSE DRIVEN AWAY

A Theology of Incarnation

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Chapter 1

“He Feeds on Ashes”

Christology and the Logic of Domination

He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?”

Isaiah 44:20 RSV

The Soul speaks to Reason: “I say, says the Soul, that on account of their rudeness I must be silent and hide my language, which I learned in the secrets at the secret court of the sweet country, in which country courtesy is law, and Love moderates, and Goodness is the nourishment. The sweetness draws me, the beauty pleases me, the goodness fills me. What therefore can I do, since I live in peace?”¹

Snapshots:

In 2008 clashes between students and police in South Korea were becoming increasingly violent. Into this turmoil a priest entered carrying the Eucharist, followed by a white-robed retinue. Photographs show a long, sinuous line of white threading through the crowd, silent, utterly calm. This simple act of presence defused the violence and the impasse was broken. Dr. Min-Ah Cho, whose own research focuses on two women marginalized by the church, sent me photographs and wrote: “I believe that these pictures tell us why we still need institutional religions and how powerful religious symbols can be even in the twenty-first century.”²

1. Marguerite Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, chap. 68 (p. 143).

2. Thank you, Dr. Min-Ah Cho, for burning this image in my brain.

During a talk to a class of divinity students I referred to the church as an abusive parent. Many students were shocked and hurt by my characterization of an institution to which they were dedicating their lives. I was genuinely sorry that I had upset members of the class. At the same time, I could not help but think: How is it that they do not know this about the church? How could they be naïve about the legacy of violence in the church, its relentless misogyny, its harshness toward sexual minorities, its intolerance of theological diversity? Some churches refuse to permit the distribution of condoms in Africa because it is a "sin" to acknowledge that sex is not exclusively procreative. A woman works in a church, but her denomination does not ordain women and so leaves her uninsured because she is ineligible for clergy benefits. Frustration over these things, like sexual pleasure and pensions for women, is contrary to traditional Christian values.

A middle-aged Presbyterian pastor, chair of Tennesseans Against the Death Penalty, wife of a wealthy banker, mother of three children, drives three hours every month to visit a man on death row, an implacable witness to Christ's words about sheep and goats (Matthew 25).

On All Saints' Day the service opens with "For All the Saints." An image of my grandmother vividly pierces my mind's eye and I see a great chain of humanity linked across the abyss of death: "we feebly struggle, they in glory shine, but all are one in thee for all are thine." As the congregation sings, I weep.

During the early days when AIDS raged unchecked and mostly unmourned, members of the gay community in San Francisco condemned the pope's callousness through a performance of the Roman Catholic ritual of excommunication. A bell tolled as for one dead, and a candle was ritually snuffed out. My friend described how moving this event was for him, and yet even in the face of the church's betrayal and indifference to the ravages of suffering he could not but be horrified by a ritual that symbolically excised someone from the body of Christ.

This book addresses itself in particular to those who have felt the wounding power of the church: women, queers, the afflicted, and those who feel alienated by oppressive or empty qualities of the Christian narrative. One of its central claims is that "those driven away" are a vital part of the body of Christ who participate in a lineage of lovers that goes back to the origin of our faith. We are part of a tradition that cherishes the message of divine presence available in the Incarnate One, Mother and Lover Christ. In revisiting the idea of incarnation, I am relying on classical texts including canonical and noncanonical writings and theological literature from the first centuries and beyond. The *Didache*, Origen, John Scotus Eriugena, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and their contemporary queer, womanist, and feminist counterparts allow us to encounter the incarnation again or perhaps for the first time. They do not all say the same thing but they open a window on new ways of understanding who we are, who God is, the significance of the incarnation, and the meaning of salvation.

Individually and collectively, these writings constitute part of the tradition that is underrepresented in theological education but that is crucial to our par-

ticipation in a catholic Christian tradition that has spanned two millennia and found a home on every continent. This is a part of the tradition that has had to "be silent and hide [its] language." What is so terrible, so threatening about these strands of the tradition? It speaks of a sweet country in which courtesy is the law and Love the moderator and Goodness provides nourishment. The sweetness of this country provides a peace beyond understanding, but it has been constantly assaulted and rejected by the institutions of the church. Origen and Eriugena were considered heretics, mostly because they rejected the idea of a wrathful and violent deity. Mechthild's book was burned in a public square, and Porete was herself burned in a public square.

It is important to challenge particular teachings that justify the church in withholding ordination or communion, train us to despise our desires or ourselves, or disconnect our suffering from the balm of faith. It is also important to challenge the idea that there is a self-consistent tradition that has "always" believed and behaved in the same way. It is important to find a way of inhabiting tradition that recovers its diversity and richness while rejecting the conflation between particular church teachings and the eternal will of God. The incarnation is the sign for Christians of the joining of heaven and earth, of divinity and humanity. We are all embraced by that glorious "oneing" as Julian of Norwich puts it. Through the symbols, the sacred texts, the traditional writings, through liturgy and practice and community, Christians learn to participate in this beautiful and infinitely mysterious reality. It is not when the church rejects us or we reject the church that we fall away from this truth. There is nowhere to fall but into the love of the Beloved. If we find another language, another set of practices, that weave our divine eros into the great Divine Eros, we might move even deeper into this truth. But we suffer the pain of actual or interior exile from the land of our religious birth. We are defrauded of our first language of faith when it is used to abuse or exclude us.

Tradition is what bears faith through time. It is the accumulated wisdom of centuries. It is also the accumulated victories of power as these are sedimented in the church. The inescapable paradox of every religion is that it must be mediated by concrete institutions that remain permanently inadequate to the glory and mystery of the Good Beyond Being.³ This is not in itself a terrible thing. We bear the divine image as finite, anxious, struggling beings. The church is everything that we are: kind, compassionate, confused, cruel, mundane, redemptive, murderous, wise, ignorant. But it claims an authority *as if* it could be free of the error and corruptions of human life. Through a theological sleight of hand, the bare-knuckled maneuverings through which one party gains a political victory over another become divine decree. It is our fate to seek the Beloved from within the human condition and not by magically circumscribing it. That the

3. For analyses of this paradox see, for example, Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 238; Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 98–106. This theme, however, is intrinsic to religion, and almost every theologian struggles with it in one way or another.

church shares our nature is not evil, any more than the human condition itself is evil. This is admittedly frustrating because we wish the church really were a magical place where sin and evil, oppression and ignorance were displaced by the unstained immediacy of the divine presence. We hurry to claim for it a perfection that it cannot possess. That we are beloved and precious does not make us perfect; that the church is beloved and precious does not make it incapable of error. The difficulty the church poses for us is that it too often compounds error with a view of its own inerrancy. In this way evil or only imperfection gain the potency of divine inspiration.

The synod and presbytery meeting, as much as the rack, torture the gospel into recanting its truth. I believe that it is an important spiritual practice, a faithful obligation, to challenge the narrative of sin and redemption that underlies so much Christian belief. It is a narrative that presupposes an irrational and inconsistent deity, split between his bloodthirsty rage and his infinite love. It steals our sense of mutual dignity and beauty by describing humanity as helplessly deformed and deserving of infinite punishment. It schools us to despise those who believe differently from ourselves. The doctrine of original sin and the sacrifice required to counteract it make participation in the church, or rather, whichever part of the church we believe teaches true doctrine, essential to salvation. This nest of beliefs and assumptions are not particularly resonant with the teachings of Jesus, but they are essential underpinnings to a view of authority that gives to the church, and to nothing else in creation, the power of salvation.

This chapter offers a purgative moment before engaging the more pleasant task of reflecting on meanings of incarnation. Many people have criticized the idea of passion and sacrifice, others have challenged the teaching on original sin. Still others have uncovered the seamy and violent history of the church; many books remind us of the times the church's allegiance to empires has trumped allegiance to gospel. I am indebted to all of these approaches. My own focus is on the struggle for orthodoxy, epitomized by the Nicene Creed. I use Athanasius as a kind of epitome of this strand of the Christian tradition. This is unfair, both because history is much more complex than one person and because Athanasius himself is probably more multivalent than his cynical strategies might suggest. But looking at the rhetorical and coercive strategies employed by Athanasius and his allies provides a "distant mirror" to contemporary struggles. The seamy and violent underpinnings of the struggle for "orthodoxy" cast a shadow on the church's appeal to a supposedly uniform and eternal set of theological and ethical practices. I focus on Athanasius as a way to surface the logic of domination that undergirds so much of our language for salvation. Christology's polarizing rhetoric and a forensic narrative are devices for domination, and I too add my voice to those seeking to demystify Christian theology so that a less oppressive vision of our faith might emerge.

For those of us wounded by the church, it seems important to reflect on how tradition works both to oppress and to heal. Most of this book is dedicated to reimagining the incarnation, but we pause here at the beginning to expose ways

the story of our Beloved has been savaged by those who know how to play the game of power well.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

It is, in a sense, natural that a reflection on the incarnation should begin with the Nicene Creed, which expressed the unity of divinity and humanity in the majestic poetry many still recite today: God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, Begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Light from Light—what a beautiful image, capturing the undiluted synthesis possible between humanity and ultimate reality: one taste, as the Buddhists put it. This is "high Christology" at its best, and I admit that the reflections on incarnation in this book rest in this sense of intoxicating oneness between humanity and divinity, rapturously, though not uniquely, accomplished in the person of Christ.

It is somewhat less edifying to examine the struggle through which the Creed became synonymous with orthodox Christianity, or more horribly, through which the idea that there could be such a thing as a uniform and orthodox faith gained ascendancy. The Creed is emblematic of the mixed nature of tradition: beautiful in its wisdom, powerful in its creation of a common and shared language, but violent in its methods and divisive in its effects. The Creed was eventually accepted as orthodox, but it reified divisions from which the church never really recovered. In describing it, Constantine papered over machinations of which Karl Rove would have been proud to celebrate a work of divine providence: "That which has commended itself to the judgment of three hundred bishops cannot be other than the doctrine of God, seeing that the Holy Spirit indwelling in the minds of so many dignified persons has enlightened them!"⁴ The Holy Spirit was apparently hard-pressed and required an ingenious and ruthless strategist to assist her.

Examining the role of Athanasius in the triumph of orthodoxy is admittedly a vast simplification of patterns of thought that had been evolving probably since Paul's nasty attack on Peter for refusing to eat with Gentiles (Galatians 1 and 2). It is not that Athanasius single-handedly created a logic of domination and structured the church by it. But he exemplifies movements within the church, then and now, that create the illusion of unity by condemning and ostracizing opponents and abusing theology and Scripture until they support his case.

In the last decades of the third century, Christians experienced intensified violence and persecution. As the real stability of the empire deteriorated, symbolic shows of unity became all the more important.⁵ Christians were increasingly

4. Constantine, "Letter to the Alexandrian Church," quoted in Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ*, 60.

5. First Decius, then Valerian and Diocletian launched efforts to "enforce religious unity and

threatened with execution, prison, and torture; with the razing of churches, the burning of Scriptures, and the appropriation of property. When Constantine came to power, he experimented with the opposite strategy for securing stability throughout the empire. In 313 he issued the famous Edict of Milan, which prescribed religious tolerance throughout the empire. Christians were no longer outlaws, but they now had to redefine themselves in light of a dramatically altered political situation. This transition from the era of periodic, if intense, persecutions to a time when Christianity became the dominant religion has preoccupied scholars for centuries. Eusebius saw in Constantine a new Cyrus, an instrument of the divine will who liberated an oppressed people. As H. A. Drake notes, Edward Gibbon saw in the ascendancy of Christianity the beginnings of "a violent suppression of variant beliefs that had continued unabated to his own day."⁶ With all of its ambiguity, the transition to an "orthodox" Christianity furnished opportunities for those who understood how to align the fortunes of the church with the power and wealth of the empire.⁷

The Nicene Creed may be a beautiful tribute to the Trinity. But the struggle over the precise wording proper to Trinity, incarnation, and redemption proved to be an occasion for identifying Christianity with the idea there *could be* a best and only expression of divine being. Faith became contingent upon supporting the party that defended the correct verbal formulation. An ecclesial structure developed to police this support. The significant triumph of the orthodox party was that it emerged with the authority to condemn not only those with variant theological views, but also those who wished to remain in communion across theological boundaries. Drake points out that it is not difficult to imagine circumstances under which an inclusive and tolerant form of Christianity would have emerged in the fourth century. The centrality of the love ethic makes it "just as likely that the most committed Christians would be those who were the most irenic. To explain why, instead, militants succeeded in gaining control of the Christian message, a different principle must be invoked."⁸ Willingness to use violence and deceit to secure its position does give a party a decisive edge.

The Council of Nicaea was called by Constantine in 325 to address conflicts over Trinitarian theology and other matters.⁹ The issue of the Trinity had

stamp out Christian 'atheism.' . . . Diocletian and his colleagues envisioned a Roman people united in common loyalty to the traditional gods as a necessary concomitant to their hard-won restoration of security and political order" (Gaddis, *There Is No Crime*, 32-33). See also Rebecca Lyman, "Athanasius," in *Empire and the Christian Tradition*, 65.

6. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 21.

7. Two recent books that reflect on the integration between Christianity and imperial power are Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire*; and *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger.

8. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 421.

9. "The purpose of Nicaea, for Constantine, was to end the controversy by producing a consensus statement of faith to which all could subscribe. . . . It mattered little if some of them understood the creed in a different fashion from others: as long as all accepted the same language and maintained communion with one another, unity would prevail" (Gaddis, *There Is No Crime*, 60).

emerged in an increasingly bitter dispute between Arius, a presbyter and teacher in Alexandria, and Alexander, bishop of Alexandria. Most of this conflict was carried out by Athanasius, who replaced Alexander upon his death. Little can be directly gleaned about Arius's life or thought since his writings were burned and those who owned copies were threatened with the death penalty (a remarkably effective way of creating a uniform past). What remains comes almost exclusively from his opponents, especially his arch-rival, Athanasius.¹⁰ Nonetheless, it appears that he had been admired as one who not only taught but embodied the "philosophical" life; that is, he was an esteemed ascetic, scholar, spiritual director, and preacher. At the time of the controversy he had been in Alexandria for some time, having remained there throughout the period of persecution that had emptied the city of so many of its leaders. Some seventy virgins were attached to his church and under his care. The reference to the seventy virgins is probably worth noting because it represents a different kind of authority from a bishop's.¹¹ Arius, spiritual leader who had remained in Alexandria during the last wave of persecution and was beloved by a community of women, represented a threat to the kind of church that Alexander and Athanasius envisioned entering the world stage.

Alexander became bishop of Alexandria, a large and important city in what is now northern Egypt, after the martyrdom of its previous bishop, Peter. The Alexandria he inherited was in tumult. Some clergy had fled or had gone into hiding, others were in prison or had been executed. By the time Alexander was ordained, many threads of conflict were roiling the Christian community. There was more than one line of ordination vying for control of the episcopal seat of this very large and affluent city.¹² The role and character of asceticism was also disputed. Sexual discipline was not perceived to be a matter of personal practice but central to the lines of authority in the church. Asceticism generated its own kind of authority, and ascetics tended to gather around adepts in philosophical schools, including that of Arius. These were small groups of women and men who joined together to study Scripture, contemplate, and experiment with ascetic discipline. These groups often understood ascetic practice as a way to move beyond sexual distinction. Asceticism later took on somewhat misogynistic connotations, but in the early church it was a way to empower and authorize women and slaves. Because it was available simply through personal discipline, it was an active manifestation of the relativity of social distinctions: in Christ "there

10. A particularly good summary of what can be known of Arius's life and thought is provided by Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 32.

11. "By ministering to the spiritual life of holy women in great cities, many cultivated clergymen were enabled to step to one side of the world of their bishops. . . . Men like Arius . . . gained no small part of their public reputation by giving spiritual guidance to devoted women, most of whom would have been virgins or widows, living in their family houses" (Brown, *Body and Society*, 266).

12. During the chaotic period prior to Alexander's ordination, Bishop Melitius of Lycopolis had entered Alexandria and ordained clergy, sending some to the mines and prisons to minister to those who had been incarcerated there. Many accounts of these controversies are available. See, for example, Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 5ff.; and Williams, *Arius*, 32-41.

is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Galatians 3:28).¹³ In the kind of Christian academy led by Arius, intellectual debate and embodied practices offered the primary modes of persuasion. Those dedicated to Christian asceticism, philosophy, and contemplation gained a measure of authority simply by their way of life, but this threatened the system in which authority was institutionally controlled and headed by a bishop.¹⁴ That this form of Christian congregation tended to support a more substantive role for women in the church only made it more problematic from an episcopal perspective.¹⁵

In this time of flux, when the status of Christianity in the empire had been so dramatically and instantaneously transformed, those bishops committed to authority derived from clerical hierarchy perceived that with the backing of the empire, enormous power was available to them to determine the kind of Christianity that would triumph. Both Alexander and Athanasius were intent on establishing the dominance of episcopal authority over the spiritual teachers who had so deeply shaped the faith of Alexandria. They were among those who believed that a strong episcopal structure was crucial to the health of the church. As a way of establishing this authority and bringing more uniformity to the teachings of the faith, Alexander demanded that the presbyters of Alexandria provide him with a sample of their preaching. When Arius did so, Alexander rejected it as unorthodox, engendering an intense conflict. It is important to note that from Arius's point of view, the issue was partly a disagreement over theology but it was also resistance to an interfering bishop. Prior to this time, there was not a well-established mechanism that allowed a bishop to silence a presbyter. To the contrary, presbyters had been accustomed to act independently as colleagues. Alexander's insistence that he could control Arius's preaching was an attempt to assert authority where it did not self-evidently belong.¹⁶ Arius's response to Alexander was a defense of traditional structures of power as much as

13. Susanna Elm points out that in some circles "the highest form of ascetic life is that of men and women together" (*Virgins of God*, 222). This point is a leitmotif of Brown's work; he describes, for example, the view (opposed by Tertullian) that sexual renunciation was a declaration that the power of sex (and its social implications) was "null and void. Possession of the Holy Spirit conferred by baptism was thought to lift men and women above the vast 'shame' of the human condition. To stand unveiled among the believers was to declare the fullness of the redemption brought by Christ. . . . Yet, in the church at least, an unveiled, continent woman was a stunning sight. Her open face and free hair summed up the hope of all believers: 'I am not veiled because the veil of corruption is taken from me; . . . I am not ashamed, because the deed of shame has been removed far from me'" (*Body and Society*, 80–81).

14. Brakke, *Athanasius*, 65. In addition, Brakke describes Athanasius's strategies to subject the virgins of Alexandria to his control (*ibid.*, chap. 1).

15. Elm points out that "though never mentioned explicitly, one subject of the reforms and of the doctrinal and legal struggles leading to their success was that of women. The decision between Eustathius and his Homoiousian model of ascetic life and that proposed by Basil directly affected the ways in which women could henceforth realize their ascetic ideals: they would act no longer in concert with their 'brothers in Christ,' and would be less and less involved in charitable works and direct doctrinal conflicts. . . . [though] it is doubtful that all forms of communal ascetic life, despite the impression generated by our 'orthodox' sources, disappeared entirely" (*Virgins of God*, 223).

16. Brakke, *Athanasius*, 58.

a defense of his theology. He was supported by bishops who considered Arius's thought within the broad scope of acceptable theology as well as by those who "were dismayed by Alexander's (and now Athanasius') authoritarian response to philosophical disagreement."¹⁷

Not long into the controversy Alexander died, and Athanasius took control of his bishopric in an ordination that was controversial at best.¹⁸ Athanasius (c. 293–373) has been "described by some as a 'gangster' for his use of force to advance his theological beliefs and revered by others as a 'saint and martyr' for his unwavering opposition to heresy."¹⁹ Certainly his political acumen helped propel both Nicene theology and the coercive tactics through which it succeeded to the forefront of Christian history. But the path was not smooth. By 335 he faced a number of serious charges: "not only that he had illegally seized the bishopric of one of the Empire's largest and most important cities but also that he maintained his position through violence and corruption. In his zeal to eliminate all dissident voices, as his opponents charged, he had beaten and imprisoned rival clergy and desecrated church property. In one incident that would haunt him for decades, opponents claimed Athanasius's goons had thrown over an altar and broken a holy chalice."²⁰ Athanasius spent many years in exile and in hiding. He was condemned by church councils for violations of church discipline, including accusations of embezzlement and extortion. The party supporting Arius and that supporting Athanasius swung back and forth for control. Yet by the end of his life, Athanasius was serving as Alexandria's bishop. The creed he fought so hard for was eventually accepted by most of the church. The authority of the episcopacy became firmly established, and the habit of declaring opponents to be heretics, excluded from the church and from salvation, became standard operating procedure. Ascetics were confined to monasteries, which were themselves brought under the authority of the bishop; virgins were separated from the public sphere, silent, and, ideally, submissive.²¹

In calling the original counsel, Constantine and many bishops thought they would calm the turmoil by agreeing to theological formulations designed to include a broad Christian community. Instead, Athanasius attempted to isolate and, if possible, destroy opponents.²² Establishing the authority of clerical

17. Ibid., 8.

18. A detailed account of the reasons the ordination was disputed is provided by Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 18.

19. Lyman, "Athanasius," 63.

20. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 3. Barnes adds to these details an unsavory account of his manipulation of elections, his violence against opponents, arrest of opponents on false charges after which they were tortured, imprisoned, or sent to the mines; extortion; his consistent disruption of councils and agreements that attempted to heal schisms, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 17–27.

21. See Brakke, *Athanasius*, 11. His first chapter lays out in much detail the rhetorical and strategic methods Athanasius deployed to transform the role of Alexandrian virgins from a public, philosophical one to a private and silent one.

22. See Gaddis: "Such attitudes guaranteed that imperial attempts to reach unity through compromise would always encounter determined opposition from the extremes, even if the vast majority

hierarchy and defining Christian community as submission to this structure represented the heart of the conflict.²³ This conflation of doctrine with power politics has made me wonder how much the disagreements with Arius were inflamed *in order* to provide an occasion to redefine how authority would operate within Christianity. In thinking about this question, let us first turn to the benefits that accrued from this reconstitution of ecclesial authority.

THE REWARDS OF "UNITY"

The term "bishop" (Greek *episkopos*) came into Christian use very early and could be used for both men and women.²⁴ The role gradually expanded in authority but became limited first to men and eventually to celibate men. By the fourth century bishops were spokesmen for their local communities. When Constantine came to power, it was the bishops with whom he negotiated. They were in his eyes "players in the game of empire."²⁵

Bishops exercised increasing control over what beliefs and practices would be tolerated in their communities, but their authority also had deeply practical and material significance. Bishops were elected for life and therefore were able to accumulate a great deal of personal power. "Large basilicas modeled on Roman assembly halls gave their liturgies and consultations a central place in the ancient cities. Bishops would become almost a parallel senate with significant influence on the emperor."²⁶

Of particular significance was the struggle for control of the church's welfare system.²⁷ Bishops were responsible for collecting and distributing charity to their constituents. These resources could amount to very significant wealth.²⁸ Charitable giving was an important Christian practice; this charity was directed

of bishops went along. The clash between these two attitudes in turn reflected a larger battle between two conflicting ideas of religious community. Was the congregation of the faithful to be inclusive, universal, building upon consensus—or was it to be marked off by firm boundaries from known enemies, the exclusive preserve of the pure who saw compromise as the work of the devil?" (*There Is No Crime*, 61).

23. Williams, *Arius*, 46. See also Brakke (*Athanasius*, 4), who identifies the consolidation of episcopal hierarchy over both other claims to ecclesial authority and ascetical or spiritual forms of authority as the two-pronged agenda of Alexander and Athanasius.

24. Mary Jo Torjesen begins her excavation of women's church leadership—found and lost during the first centuries of Christianity—with a description of a mosaic dedicated to Bishop Theodora (*When Women Were Priests*, 9–10).

25. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 73. See also Brown's discussion of the bishop's parallel role to Roman civic leaders: "Poverty and Power," in *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, 90, *et passim*.

26. Lyman, "Athanasius," 66. Cf. Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 90: "Rival churches competed by replicating the social services provided by their opponents. . . . From services to the poor to new basilicas, the Christian presence was heightened by men in a hurry. Each Christian group was anxious to leave a permanent mark on the city."

27. Brakke, *Athanasius*, 190.

28. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 396.

not only to the poor but also to virgins and others who were supported by the church. All of this was routed through the bishop.²⁹ Controlling this much wealth allowed bishops to channel resources to those parties and peoples of whom he approved. While their virtue added to his prestige, a bishop could make his support for virgins and widows, for example, contingent on their support of his agenda. This was significant in a time when virgins could still participate in theological controversies.

Not only Christians, but the emperor routed charitable giving through the bishops. In this way they became responsible for dispensing the large grain allotments granted by the emperor to a city. This gave them influence over grain shipments through which they could even "demand obedience from captains of ships."³⁰ Given the amount of wealth that flowed through a bishop's hands, it is not surprising that struggle for the bishopric of Alexandria, a very wealthy city, was intense. That many of the crimes of which Athanasius was accused concern the integrity with which he handled his charitable responsibilities is perhaps not surprising. He was accused of inhibiting shipments of grain and was exiled by Constantine for embezzlement. These accusations may not mean that he hoarded wealth for himself but that he was directing charity to his own party at the expense of other Christians.³¹

In addition to financial incentives, Constantine extended the judicial authority of bishops. Parties in a suit were allowed to appeal to a bishop, even if one party objected to the change of venue. Once the bishops ruled, there could be no further appeal.³² In addition, the testimony of bishops obviated the need and even the possibility of other witnesses: once a bishop testified, no other witnesses could be heard. Bishops themselves became immune to secular courts of law, and only councils of bishops could address accusations against them. This concentration of financial and juridical power in the hands of the bishops made them powerful patrons in a society where patronage was the primary social lubricant. "In many ways, bishops could be equated with the traditional patrons and

29. "Laypeople were not to question how the bishop distributed their offerings, nor were they to give directly to the needy and so bypass the bishop" (Brakke, *Athanasius*, 117). Brown also quotes this fourth-century rule: "If any man should do something apart from the bishop, he does it in vain; for it will not be accounted a good work." But he notes that private giving remained a powerful form of patronage that was not always handed over to the bishop, though Constantine also preferred to route "charity" through the bishops (*Power and Persuasion*, 95, 98).

30. Lyman, "Athanasius," 67. She points out, "Bishops and deacons had become effective and unique urban mediators between the elite and the poor. Because bishops were elected for life, unlike Roman offices filled for set terms, and were protected from execution, they possessed an unusual longevity, influence, and cohesion with other leaders through councils. Large basilicas modeled on Roman assembly halls gave their liturgies and consultations a central place in the ancient cities. Bishops would become almost a parallel senate with significant influence on the emperor" (*ibid.*, 66).

31. The issue of grain shipments is discussed in a number of places including Drake's *Constantine and the Bishops*, 396; Lyman, "Athanasius," 70-71; Brakke, *Athanasius*, 6.

32. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 325. Brown also discusses the judicial powers of the bishops in *Power and Persuasion*, 100.

elites of the ancient world, protecting their perquisites and their flocks as great magnates always had."³³

Because the authority of the bishops concerned wealth, juridical power, deployment of violence, access to public funds, and confiscation of property, it is not surprising that theology became deeply intertwined with imperial politics. Some Christian bishops magnificently exploited access to imperial power. The kind of power and authority that bishops came to wield mirrored the kind of power the empire could support. Episcopal authority reasserted patriarchal authority over women, slaves, and the poor, reinforcing the alliance between bishops and empire. This alliance is also reflected in the identification of "catholic" bishops as the legitimate channel for power and money. Identifying fellow Christians as heretics or schismatics meant more than the pleasure of imagining them in hell. "Heretics" were obliged by Constantine to hand over their property to the catholic church.³⁴ The construction of heresy could be lucrative in a situation that allowed bishops to acquire significant benefits from a line between true and false belief.

THE RHETORIC OF BINARY OPPOSITION

Just as the emperors prior to Constantine had sought to imprint an artificial unity on the empire by eradicating Christian "atheism," those, like Athanasius, who were committed to a strong episcopal authority attempted to create an artificial unity of faith by eradicating "false" versions of Christian faith. In this way a fluid and diverse set of communities were split between truth and falsehood, catholicity and heresy. Through the long-protracted conflict over Trinitarian language, the habit of conceiving Christian community as a single, unified, orthodox tradition constantly defeating an utterly alien and demonically inspired band of heretics destined for hell became integral to Christian identity.³⁵ The transition that placed "the keys to the kingdom" in the hands of an ecclesial hierarchy required an ideological structure to support it. Out of the plural ways Christians had preached and lived, there would be one that would dominate all others. To accomplish this, Athanasius shunned consensus and sought to obtain unity through division and conflict, by identifying—even creating—and then excluding opponents. Through an appeal to "unity" he mounted a relentless assault on Arius, on those who tolerated diversity, on philosophical circles, on the autonomy of virgins, and on the independence of monastic communities. His "unity," by some estimates, made over half of Christianity "heretical."³⁶

33. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 72.

34. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 174.

35. Elaine Pagels's *Origin of Satan* is a particularly careful and detailed account of how this opposition came to dominate Christian consciousness.

36. "A year before the bishops met at Nicaea, Constantine had tried to legislate an end to

For Constantine, the council was intended to create a unified understanding of Christianity to which all parties could subscribe.³⁷ Early on the council developed language broad enough to include both Arius's and Athanasius's ideas. Those seeking consensus proposed that technical language be removed to avoid offense: "we declare that the Son is like the Father in all things, as the holy scriptures indeed declare and teach."³⁸ But these efforts failed. For Athanasius, the point was not to find words upon which consensus could be built, but rather to clearly define opponents so they could be exiled from Christianity and, perhaps more importantly, from their bishoprics. Athanasius explained later "that while he certainly had no quarrel with more moderate formulations such as 'the Son is like the Father,' these were insufficient because they did not explicitly exclude 'Arian' interpretations. The mere fact that the other side might also find it acceptable was enough to make it unacceptable."³⁹ The intense focus on technical precision arose because the positions were so close that they required sword-like language to parse theology ever finer, lest a common ground was accidentally discovered.⁴⁰

Conflict requires an opponent. Where one does not exist, it must be invented. The very idea of an Arian "party" reflects the success of Athanasius in transforming an intellectual debate with a respected fellow Christian teacher into a struggle against a heretical school. Through skillful polemics, those who opposed him at Nicaea became a single heretical party. "Arius and his original theology became irrelevant except as a heretical category to be attached to the opponents of Nicaea. Using conventional heresiological categories, a 'school' was created based on a demonically inspired teacher, and diverse opinions could be melded into a coherent sect relentlessly opposed to the apostolic truth of the orthodox. . . . Portrayed as philosophical not biblical, political not holy, and effeminate not masculine, Arians opposed the 'holy' Alexander and the council of Nicaea. This binary opposition . . . turned Arius from a historical opponent into a mythological heresiarch and the shifting theological alliances into a vast imperial and demonic conspiracy."⁴¹

Rowan Williams echoes this point, describing "Arianism" as a "fantasy based

'heretical sects,' which, by one estimate, may have included about half the Christians of the empire" (Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 174). Brown points out that appeals to unity were often made by those who were themselves members of a minority faction (*Power and Persuasion*, 90).

37. Constantine's role at Nicaea is the subject of some debate. Gaddis characterizes his pursuit of consensus as a "'coercive harmony,' the violence of the center, [which] would underpin the religious politics of the Christian empire" (*There Is No Crime*, 65). Drake also sees Constantine's primary effort to forge a "big tent" type of Christianity that was constantly undermined by bishops such as Athanasius (*Constantine and the Bishops*, e.g., 421).

38. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 139, 144.

39. Gaddis, *There Is No Crime*, 60–61. Lyman notes: "The term *homoousios* (of the same substance or being) seems to have been included only because it was rejected by Eusebius of Nicomedia and others" ("Athanasius," 70).

40. Lyman notes: "The battles became increasingly heated and technical not because of profound theological differences but rather because in fact so much was shared in common" ("Athanasius," 71).

41. Lyman, "Athanasius," 71.

on the polemic of Nicene writers, above all Athanasius.⁴² But this "fantasy" was crucial for Athanasius. Arius was a preacher who expressed the relationship between the Son and the Father in a particular way. He was supported by women and men in his community. He was also supported by others who shared his theological views. Still others shared his view that truths of faith should be explored by philosophical debate rather than ecclesial fiat. Some agreed with the orthodox party but did not consider disagreements of this sort to be a reason to break Christian communion. All of these points of view were transformed into a heretical *sect* that opposed itself to "orthodox" *tradition*. Identification of a unified opponent became essential to the transformation of Christianity from a pluriform set of practices and beliefs into a unified Catholic Church determined by clear boundaries and regulated by an ordained, male clergy. Without this clear demarcation, episcopal authority has insufficient traction.

Constructing opposing points of view as "heresy" is a way of changing a debate into a struggle between merely human opinion and divinely inspired truth. Within a logic of domination, an opposing position is illegitimate simply because it is different from what a more powerful party has claimed to be true. When we go to church over the years and hear the same passages preached on, a virtually infinite set of meanings is opened. The trick of orthodoxy is not so much to deny this plurality of interpretation but to accuse those with whom one *disagrees* of projecting their own experiences while insisting that one's own interpretation stands in the tradition of the apostles. Faithful stewards of the divine Word "hand down only what they, in turn, received from the apostles, without adding or subtracting anything. By invoking the authority of the ancient consensus of the apostles they can claim, then, that what they teach is not only the *unchanging truth* but absolutely *certain*."⁴³ It is interesting to note how blithely Athanasius deploys his rhetoric of opposition. He concludes a long letter interpreting the Psalms with a defense of the practice of chanting rather than saying them. Not unlike Cynthia Bourgeault, he describes the meditative and somatic benefits of chant. But (unlike Bourgeault) he identifies anyone who speaks rather than chants the Psalms as a sinner: "Well, then, they who do not read the Scriptures in this way, that is to say, who do not chant the Divine Songs intelligently but simply please themselves, most surely are to blame, for praise is not befitting in a sinner's mouth."⁴⁴ A sinner appears to be anyone who disagrees with Athanasius on however minor a point.

Athanasius directs this reasoning against Arius's verbal formulation but also against the idea of Christianity as a path of wisdom. Arius represented a kind of

42. Williams, *Arius*, 82. This construction of an Arian "school" through Athanasius's rhetoric is a theme echoed by many historians; e.g., Barnes points out it is not a term people used to describe their own position but was a term of abuse hurled at opponents who disagreed with the "orthodox" party for a variety of reasons (*Athanasius and Constantius*, 15).

43. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 155.

44. Athanasius, "The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms," in *On the Incarnation*, 115.

authority that a small community granted to the wisdom and spiritual practice of a particular teacher. It is somewhat resonant with the guru tradition of Eastern religions. It is not an institution that is the primary vehicle of religious transmission but the *shakti* of a spiritual adept. As a contemplative practitioner, I can only regard the impoverishment of this tradition as a tragic loss; but from the perspective of someone like Athanasius, corralling, controlling, and disempowering the tradition of spiritual teachers was crucial to the consolidation of episcopal power. Part of the strategy for this disempowerment was the construction of wisdom traditions as heretical. *Teachers* create new and unnecessary lines of thinking; *clergy* mediate truth handed down by Christ. Athanasius himself was an original theological thinker who did much to articulate a novel vision of Christian thought and practice. But this originality was occluded by his insistence that, in contrast to "teachers," he passively expressed an unchanging tradition.

The term *homoousia* (one substance), so important to his view of orthodoxy, is itself a rather dramatic break with biblical theology. But Athanasius insisted that he was merely a conduit for a tradition that had remained unchanged from the time Christ handed down correct doctrine (and presumably the admonition to chant psalms) to his male disciples.⁴⁵ No less creative and innovative than others, proponents of "orthodox" belief cloaked their own innovations in the appeal to a self-identical authoritative past while accusing their opponents of imposing private opinions on sacred texts. (This strategy has been powerfully deployed by advocates of "family values" in defense of a kind of family that did not exist before the modern period.) By characterizing controversy as conflict between apostolic truth and heresy, bishops who shared Athanasius's views of power and authority were able to create an impression that there was such a thing as an unalterable tradition and remaining true to that tradition was identical with fidelity to Christ himself—even though this unalterable tradition was being created in their own writings.

The potency of the construction of heresy is ratcheted up when those who hold variant views are not only one's own enemies but the enemy of God. "Opinion" is not only private, an arbitrary choice, merely subjective, but is demonically inspired.⁴⁶ Athanasius tapped into a tradition that deployed the rhetoric of demonology to frame the issues in a way that precluded a genuine exchange of ideas or a sympathetic encounter with various possible interpretations.⁴⁷ Even

45. Brakke, *Athanasius*, 68.

46. This demonization of opponents enables Athanasius to "redefine the very concept of Christian community, restricting it to only those who espoused Nicene Trinitarian doctrine and who remained in communion with himself. All others were pushed outside the boundaries and classified as 'persecutors' not fundamentally different from the pagans" (Gaddis, *There Is No Crime*, 72).

47. "Tapping into this tradition allowed Athanasius to undercut his opponent and deny them any right to a sympathetic or unbiased hearing—then as now, a far easier means of dealing with uncomfortable situations than the alternative of a reasoned give-and-take that more thoughtful forms of discourse require" (Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 415–16). Compare Athanasius's rhetoric against Arius with that Irenaeus used against Valentinus, also a popular, erudite, and profound thinker, who became in Irenaeus's construction no longer a popular and erudite Christian philosopher but, with his followers, "sons of the devil" destined to eternal fire (Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 156).

now it requires great mental discipline to conceive of Arius or the Valentinians or even Origen representing legitimate strands of Christian experience. The beauty of their lives, their compassionate interpretations of the gospel, and the devotion they inspired notwithstanding, they remain heretics, hostile to Christ and his church.

It was particularly ingenious to extend the rhetoric of demonization to those who did not think that theology should be grounds to break fellowship with fellow Christians. Monks, for example, considered hospitality, even to murderers (or those, like Athanasius himself, who were hiding from soldiers), a crucial element of their religious practice. But Athanasius insisted they demand theological credentials as a condition of hospitality. Offering hospitality to Arians or to those who associated with Arians was itself as bad as holding heretical views.⁴⁸ In a logical progression doctrine became a pathway to salvation; deviation from correct doctrine is demonically inspired and assures eternal damnation; an open communion tolerates those God rejects and is therefore another form of satanic perversion. Within this framework, it becomes not only logical but in a sense necessary to ease over from verbal to physical violence against one's opponents.

The excesses and horrors of Diocletian's persecution had led to a repudiation of state violence as a means of enforcing unity of belief. Against this trend, however, the "polarizing rhetoric of the heresy debates, with its emphasis on the evil nature of opponents, helped restore coercion as a legitimate means of protecting the interests of the state."⁴⁹ In the immediate aftermath of the Great Persecution that had so badly traumatized Christian communities, violence was turned on other Christians. For Christians and Jews, civil rights began to follow the fault line of orthodoxy.⁵⁰ Falling on the wrong side of the orthodox party could invite physical violence. Athanasius himself made use of a labor corps that functioned as "a virtual paramilitary force."⁵¹ But he did not hesitate to make use of the state to carry out violence against his opponents, for example, arranging for bishops who opposed his ordination to be arrested and tortured by imperial soldiers.⁵²

As the distinction between genuine and heretical ecclesial leaders took root, "orthodox" bishops could invoke state violence for their own ends.⁵³ At the behest of bishops, the emperor could and did order "'heretics and schismatics' to

48. Brakke, *Athanasius*, 134–35.

49. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 439.

50. The appalling history of anti-Semitism begins in early Christianity and the conflation of religion and civil rights. Pagels quotes Timothy Barnes: "Constantine translated Christian prejudice against Jews into legal disabilities" (*Beyond Belief*, 170).

51. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 397; Brown echoes this point: "By 418 the 'most reverend bishop' commanded, in effect, a hand-picked force of some five hundred men with strong arms and backs, the *parabalani*, who were nominally entrusted with the 'care of the bodies of the weak' as stretcher-bearers and hospital orderlies. The massed presence of the *parabalani* made itself felt in the theater, in the law courts, and in front of the town hall of Alexandria. The town council was forced to complain to the emperor of such intimidation. . . . 'Throughout the empire, the personnel associated with the bishop's care of the poor had become a virtual urban militia'" (*Power and Persuasion*, 102–3).

52. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 22.

53. Gaddis, *There Is No Crime*, 73; cf. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 180; Lyman, "Athanasius," 67.

stop meeting, even in private houses, and to surrender their churches and whatever property they owned to the catholic church."⁵⁴ It is noteworthy that it was not religious diversity itself that became the object of violence. Constantine did not penalize pagans for not being Christian.⁵⁵ The ability to enforce theological and liturgical uniformity through state violence channeled ecclesial power in the hands of the bishops and so diminished other sources of authority. As Rebecca Lyman points out, "Over the third century, episcopal power had concentrated over other church offices; traditional charismatic privileges such as the laity's right to preach, the teaching authority and mobility of widows, or the forgiveness of sins by confessors, were limited."⁵⁶ Over the decades, emperors shifted their allegiance from one strand of Christianity to another, and the violence moved in waves against various communities as the tides turned one way or another. But the pattern of making doctrine the primary site of Christian faith and using violence to maintain "unity" had gained ascendancy.

This violence is never actually done by the church or the clergy themselves: through the sleight of hand that makes human agents stand in for divine ones, it is always God who acted. According to his own rhetoric, Athanasius's writings, his withholding of grain shipments, his sacrilege against another cleric's altar, his use of thugs against enemies, his outright lies and prevarications, his hiding from the emperor or fellow bishops, his instructions to destroy texts that might support opponents' preaching are all God's activities. If the vote of a synod goes with him, it is because God willed it. If it goes against him, it is because Satan has infected the other bishops. God wished him to dispense charitable contributions in ways that reinforced his power. God, sharing Athanasius's anxieties about intelligent and articulate women and charismatic spiritual leaders, inspired strategies to shunt them to the margins of history. "We have here the very heart of human evil as it rationalizes itself. Once a finite, historical complex is given divine status, all means are justified in protecting that complex."⁵⁷

CONSTRUCTING A NARRATIVE

The authority of tradition became identified with ordained clergy whose power was institutional rather than charismatic. Ostensibly, authority rested primarily

54. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 174. cf. Lyman, "Athanasius," 73: "Public orthodoxy created an official and public topography of authorized meeting spaces and holy places. Just as Athanasius wished to regulate private reading or ascetic households, other bishops banned private gathering or worship spaces."

55. In the fourth century, "Christians first used both a rhetoric conducive to coercion and the tools of coercion itself not against pagans but against other Christians. Heresy, not paganism, was the first object of Christian intolerance" (Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 416). Pagels is among those who point out that the earliest demonization is against Jews; see, for example, *Origin of Satan*.

56. Lyman, "Athanasius," 67.

57. Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection*, 168.

in revealed Scriptures, but it would be the bishops, the mouthpieces of God, who were to be the arbiters of scriptural interpretation.⁵⁸ It is they who would condense the true meaning of Scripture in creeds and doctrines.⁵⁹ These mechanisms of power were held together by a narrative that provided the theological underpinnings of episcopal authority. Unsurprisingly, Athanasius provided a primer of Christian theology.

On the Incarnation tells the story of salvation in a way that illustrated why the church and its clergy were the necessary gatekeepers of salvation. The story is probably familiar. Creation was brought into being from nothing as good and perfect by God. The first humans possessed the capacity to choose good and evil but were commanded to refrain from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve, in an act of inexplicable perversity, "went astray and became vile, throwing away their birthright of beauty."⁶⁰ Eating the fruit caused them to lose their knowledge of God and become subject to corruption and death, falling ever more completely under the thrall of Satan and his violent and perverse works. This creates for God a "divine dilemma": "The thing that was happening was in truth both monstrous and unfitting. It would, of course, have been unthinkable that God should go back upon His word and that man, having transgressed, should not die; but it was equally monstrous that beings which once had shared the nature of the Word should perish and turn back again into non-existence through corruption."⁶¹ Either of these scenarios would be unworthy of the goodness of God. But the punishment God was required to impose was deeper than anything repentance or good works could correct.⁶² "He could not falsify Himself; what, then, was God to do? Was He to demand repentance from men for their transgression?" This would not do because "repentance would not guard the Divine consistency, for, if death did not hold dominion over men, God would still remain untrue."⁶³

God ordained that the punishment for disobedience would be a transformation of human nature so severe that it could no longer help but sin. Since human beings no longer had the capacity to do anything but sin, they could neither repent of their disobedience nor prevent themselves from continually falling into new sin. Desire for God expressed in contemplation, study, prayer, and communities of prayer are themselves sinful because they are dedicated to transformation

58. See, for example, Brakke, *Athanasius*, 68. As Irenaeus puts it: "it is necessary to obey the priests who are in the church—those who have received the succession from the apostles, as we have shown, and who have also received . . . the certain gift of truth . . . but to hold in suspicion those who stand apart from the primary line of succession, and who gather in any place whatsoever, [and to regard them] either as heretics with evil intentions or as schismatics, puffed up with themselves, or as hypocrites" (*Against Heresies* 4.36.2–4, quoted in Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 155).

59. Pagels develops a particular clear and concise account of the interlocking authority of creed, canon, and clergy in *Beyond Belief*, especially chaps. 4 and 5.

60. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, §3 (p. 29).

61. *Ibid.*, §6 (p. 32).

62. *Ibid.*, §7 (p. 33).

63. *Ibid.* (pp. 32–33).

rather than obtaining forgiveness. God is inspired by love to desire salvation but bound by his penal code to make it impossible. This "divine dilemma" is resolved by the sacrifice of the Son. In order to satisfy both his judgment and his desire for reconciliation, God sends the second person of the Trinity to become incarnate and take on death for humanity out of love. "Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, when He had fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men."⁶⁴ Christians live pure lives and study the Scriptures in order to face Christ, who is no longer judged by humanity but "will Himself be Judge, judging each and all according to their deeds done in the body, whether good or ill. Then for the good is laid up the heavenly kingdom, but for those that practise evil outer darkness and the eternal fire."⁶⁵ The divine dilemma is resolved in one sense by satisfying the divine law. It is resolved in another sense by allowing God to express both his desire to destroy and his desire to save.

Notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary, this is an astonishingly creative retelling of the drama of salvation that enjoys little direct biblical support. There is in Genesis the story of disobedience, but there is no divine dilemma, no annihilation of human nature, no deformation of human agency so that it can do nothing but sin. Neither do the Gospels tell us anything about an atonement demanded by the Father in order to turn aside his destruction. It also represents a break with ways theologians had been translating biblical narrative into theology. Irenaeus described Adam and Eve as spiritual children who had to learn moral awareness, like all children, by making mistakes. He, like Origen and others, conceived of the passion as a ransom of humanity from the devil. Because God could not use violent means to redeem humanity, the Trinity conspired to trick the devil.

There are a number of odd things about this narrative. It seems strange that God, who is utterly unconstrained in his actions, devises a punishment that automatically destroys the thing he most desires. It is puzzling that the goodness of God is expressed so decisively in a law that initially requires the endless suffering of all of humanity and later requires the endless suffering of only most of it. Endless torment is apparently part of the original architecture of creation, desired for its own sake. Among human beings, only sociopaths desire in this way. It also seems strange that God can draw cosmos out of nothingness, wrestle Satan into submission, and re-create the cosmic harmony so tragically lost in Eden but cannot make use of anything in creation but an ordained clergy to actualize the salvation so dearly bought. It is true, technically, that Christ destroyed death and

64. *Ibid.*, §8 (p. 34).

65. *Ibid.*, §56.

reconciled humanity to God. But we do not have access to this unless we believe what the church teaches us. It is only through the church that the benefits of Christ's sacrifice can accrue. Without the bishops "Christ died for no purpose."

The insertion of the "divine dilemma" into the drama of redemption reconstructs salvation so that it becomes the sort of thing that can be delivered only institutionally. An institution cannot deliver love or compassion or wisdom or awakening. It can, like a court of law, condemn or remit punishment. Sin becomes identified with disobedience to law; its analogue is a crime through which one might end up in court. Divine punishment mirrors the penalty law courts mete out: torture and death that disfigure and maim human nature itself. The church, through its ordained clergy, functions like a court-appointed attorney who negotiates a reduced sentence if we agree to plead guilty.

The construction of the Christian narrative of redemption through the doctrine of original sin and substitutionary atonement narrowly aligns divine presence and ecclesial power. Everything outside the institutional church is stripped of significance. This is no less true after the Reformation, which continued to affirm that the primary benefit of Christian belief was that it enabled us to avoid eternal torment. Protestant churches continued to be committed to these doctrines and to the singular power of orthodox belief, mediated by churches, to save us from perdition. Nature, other religions, and even other forms of religious practice within the church are either irrelevant or demonized. The attack on Arius, like those on Valentinus, Origen, and Porete, reflect a perennial hostility to forms of faithfulness less dependent on clergy to mediate salvation.

In Athanasius's retelling the incarnation becomes less a story about the love of God for humanity than a greatly exaggerated threat of utter condemnation. It is a story of divine violence that blasphemes the eternal Goodness and obscures the human desire for this Goodness. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: outside the church there is no salvation. Here we have the apotheosis of raw power projected onto God and embodied in the church's fantasy of control. The richness of the Christian tradition cannot be circumscribed by this narrative or by the binary logic and coercive strategies that accompany it. As we return to the incarnation and passion, it is important to remind ourselves that this orthodox way of telling the Christian story underwrites a logic of domination. Its captivity to this logic has tragically diluted the church's witness to the distinctive beauty and poignancy of divine love.

A SWEET COUNTRY

In Athanasius we see one example of an impulse within Christian tradition toward domination and exclusion. This impulse came to dominate the history of the church. Rhetoric that demonizes opponents and a theology that construes humanity to be utterly enthralled, subjectively and objectively, to evil conspire to make episcopal power the only means of salvation. From this perspective the era-

sure of native populations from the New World, the torture and death of thousands of women as witches and heretics, the entrance of Africans into Western history as chattel, millennia devoted to the persecution of Jews, the decimation of Irish culture, the suicides of gay Christians, and the sacrifice of untold others to sexual and domestic abuse all become collateral damage of the story of Christ's incarnation and passion. The costliness of this damage is evident, too, in the writings that have been destroyed, the voices silenced, the legions of lovers defrauded of the chance to grow spiritually and intellectually, and the impoverishment of a church that humiliates those whose charisms it desperately needs. Contemporary Christians will find much that is familiar in this distant mirror: the mendacious use of Scripture, the occasional but horrifying use of violence, the insistence that there is an eternal and self-identical version of Christian faith and ethics that is being created in the conflict itself, the use of theological terror whose god seems more like enraged homophobes than the Jesus of the Gospels.

Mark Jordan argues that "the history of Christian theology can be seen as a long flight from the full consequences of its central profession. The big business of theology has been to construct alternate bodies for Jesus the Christ—tidier bodies, bodies better conformed to institutional needs. I think of these artificial bodies as Jesus' corpses, and I consider large parts of official Christology as their mortuary."⁶⁶ In this chapter I have been at pains to draw attention to the logic behind this postresurrection burial of Christ in an effort to disenchant the narrative of original sin, atoning death, and salvation through obedience to church teachings. It is easy to remain in thrall to this story, whether we stay in or leave the church. The rest of this book experiments with other ways of understanding the power of incarnation to bring us good news of a sweet country where "Love moderates, and Goodness is nourishment."⁶⁷

66. Mark Jordan, "God's Body," in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Laughlin, 283.

67. Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, chap. 68 (p. 143).