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DOMINION

The Making of the Western Mind

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Love, and do as you will.

—SAINT AUGUSTINE

*That you feel something to be right may have its cause in your never having
thought much about
yourself and having blindly accepted what has been labelled right since your
childhood.*

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

All you need is love

—JOHN LENNON AND
PAUL MCCARTNEY

Some three or four decades before the birth of Christ, Rome's first heated swimming pool was built on the Esquiline Hill. The location, just outside the city's ancient walls, was a prime one. In time, it would become a showcase for some of the wealthiest people in the world: an immense expanse of luxury villas and parks. But there was a reason why the land beyond the Esquiline Gate had been left undeveloped for so long. For many centuries, from the very earliest days of Rome, it had been a place of the dead. When labourers first began work on the swimming pool, a corpse-stench still hung in the air. A ditch, once part of the city's venerable defensive system, was littered with the carcasses of those too poor to be laid to rest in tombs. Here was where dead slaves, 'once they had been slung out from their narrow cells',¹ were dumped. Vultures, flocking in such numbers that they were known as 'the birds of the Esquiline',² picked the bodies clean. Nowhere else in Rome was the process of gentrification quite so dramatic. The marble fittings, the tinkling fountains, the perfumed flower beds: all were raised on the backs of the dead.

The process of reclamation, though, took a long time. Decades on from the first development of the region beyond the Esquiline Gate, vultures were still to be seen there, wheeling over a site named the Sessorium. This remained what it had always been: 'the place set aside for the execution of slaves'.³ It was not – unlike the arenas in which criminals were put to death for the delectation of cheering crowds – a place of glamour. Exposed to public view like slabs of meat hung from a market stall, troublesome slaves were nailed to crosses. Even as seedlings imported from exotic lands began to be planted across the emerging parkland of the Esquiline, these bare trees remained as a token of its sinister past. No death was more excruciating, more contemptible, than crucifixion. To be hung naked, 'long in agony, swelling with ugly weals on shoulders and chest',⁴ helpless to beat away the clamorous birds: such a fate, Roman intellectuals agreed, was the worst imaginable. This in turn was what rendered it so suitable a punishment for slaves. Lacking such a sanction, the entire order of the city might fall apart. Luxury and splendour such as Rome could boast were dependent, in the final reckoning, on keeping those who sustained it in their place. 'After all, we have slaves drawn from every corner of the world in our households, practising strange customs, and foreign cults, or none – and it is only by means of terror that we can hope to coerce such scum.'⁵

Nevertheless, while the salutary effect of crucifixion on those who might otherwise threaten the order of the state was taken for granted, Roman attitudes to the punishment were shot through with ambivalence. Naturally, if it were to serve as a deterrent it needed to be public. Nothing spoke more eloquently of a failed revolt than the sight of hundreds upon hundreds of corpse-hung crosses, whether lining a highway or else massed before a rebellious city, the hills all around it stripped bare of their trees. Even in peacetime, executioners would make a spectacle of their victims by suspending them in a variety of inventive ways: 'one, perhaps, upside down, with his head towards the ground, another with a stake driven through his genitals, another attached by his arms to a yoke'.⁶ Yet in the exposure of the crucified to the public gaze there lurked a paradox. So foul was the carrion-reek of their disgrace that many felt tainted even by viewing a crucifixion. The Romans, for all that they had

adopted the punishment as the ‘supreme penalty’,⁷ refused to countenance the possibility that it might have originated with them. Only a people famed for their barbarousness and cruelty could ever have devised such a torture: the Persians, perhaps, or the Assyrians, or the Gauls. Everything about the practice of nailing a man to a cross – a ‘*crux*’ – was repellent. ‘Why, the very word is harsh on our ears.’⁸ It was this disgust that crucifixion uniquely inspired which explained why, when slaves were condemned to death, they were executed in the meanest, wretchedest stretch of land beyond the city walls; and why, when Rome burst its ancient limits, only the world’s most exotic and aromatic plants could serve to mask the taint. It was also why, despite the ubiquity of crucifixion across the Roman world, few cared to think much about it. Order, the order loved by the gods and upheld by magistrates vested with the full authority of the greatest power on earth, was what counted – not the elimination of such vermin as presumed to challenge it. Criminals broken on implements of torture: who were such filth to concern men of breeding and civility? Some deaths were so vile, so squalid, that it was best to draw a veil across them entirely.

The surprise, then, is less that we should have so few detailed descriptions in ancient literature of what a crucifixion might actually involve, than that we should have any at all.* The corpses of the crucified, once they had first provided pickings for hungry birds, tended to be flung into a common grave. In Italy, undertakers dressed in red, ringing bells as they went, would drag them there on hooks. Oblivion, like the loose earth scattered over their tortured bodies, would then entomb them. This was a part of their fate. Nevertheless, amid the general silence, there is one major exception which proves the rule. Four detailed accounts of the process by which a man might be sentenced to the cross, and then suffer his punishment, have survived from antiquity. Remarkably, they all describe the same execution: a crucifixion that took place some sixty or seventy years after the building of the first heated swimming pool in Rome. The location, though, was not the Esquiline, but another hill, outside the walls of Jerusalem: Golgotha, ‘which means the place of a skull’.⁹ The victim, a Jew by the name of Jesus, a wandering preacher from an obscure town named Nazareth, in a region north of Jerusalem named Galilee, had been convicted of a capital offence against Roman order. The four earliest accounts of his execution, written some decades after his death, specify what this meant in practice. The condemned man, after his sentencing, was handed over to soldiers to be flogged. Next, because he had claimed to be ‘the king of the Jews’, his guards mocked him, and spat on him, and set a crown of thorns on his head. Only then, bruised and bloodied, was he led out on his final journey. Hauling his cross as he went, he stumbled his way through Jerusalem, a spectacle and an admonition to all who saw him, and onwards, along the road to Golgotha.* There, nails were driven into his hands and feet, and he was crucified. After his death, a spear was jabbed into his side. There is no reason to doubt the essentials of this narrative. Even the most sceptical historians have tended to accept them. ‘The death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross is an established fact, arguably the only established fact about him.’¹⁰ Certainly, his sufferings were nothing exceptional. Pain and humiliation, and the protracted horror of ‘the most wretched of deaths’:¹¹ these, over the course of Roman history, were the common lot of multitudes.

Decidedly not the common lot of multitudes, however, was the fate of Jesus’ corpse. Lowered from the cross, it was spared a common grave. Claimed by a wealthy admirer, it was prepared

reverently for burial, laid in a tomb and left behind a heavy boulder. Such, at any rate, is the report of all four of the earliest narratives of Jesus' death – narratives that in Greek were called *euangelia*, 'good news', and would come to be known in English as gospels.* The accounts are not implausible. Certainly, we know from archaeological evidence that the corpse of a crucified man might indeed, on occasion, be granted dignified burial in the ossuaries beyond the walls of Jerusalem. Altogether more startling, though – not to say unprecedented – were the stories of what happened next. That women, going to the tomb, had found the entrance stone rolled away. That Jesus, over the course of the next forty days, had appeared to his followers, not as a ghost or a reanimated corpse, but resurrected into a new and glorious form. That he had ascended into heaven, and was destined to come again. Time would see him hailed, not just as a man, but as a god. By enduring the most agonising fate imaginable, he had conquered death itself. 'Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth . . .'¹²

The utter strangeness of all this, for the vast majority of people in the Roman world, did not lie in the notion that a mortal might become divine. The border between the heavenly and the earthly was widely held to be permeable. In Egypt, the oldest of monarchies, kings had been objects of worship for unfathomable aeons. In Greece, stories were told of a 'hero god'¹³ by the name of Heracles, a muscle-bound monster-slayer who, after a lifetime of spectacular feats, had been swept up from the flames of his own pyre to join the immortals. Among the Romans, a similar tale was told of Romulus, the founder of their city. In the decades before the crucifixion of Jesus, the pace of such promotions into the ranks of the gods had begun to quicken. So vast had the scope of Roman power become that any man who succeeded in making himself its master was liable to seem less human than divine. The ascent into heaven of one of those, a warlord by the name of Julius Caesar, had been heralded by the blaze across the skies of a fiery-tailed star; that of a second, Caesar's adopted son, who had won for himself the name of Augustus, by a spirit seen rising – just as Heracles had done – from a funeral pyre. Even sceptics who scorned the possibility that a fellow mortal might truly become a god were happy to concede its civic value. 'For the human spirit that believes itself to be of divine origin will thereby be emboldened in the undertaking of mighty deeds, more energetic in accomplishing them, and by its freedom from care rendered more successful in carrying them out.'¹⁴

Divinity, then, was for the very greatest of the great: for victors, and heroes, and kings. Its measure was the power to torture one's enemies, not to suffer it oneself: to nail them to the rocks of a mountain, or to turn them into spiders, or to blind and crucify them after conquering the world. That a man who had himself been crucified might be hailed as a god could not help but be seen by people everywhere across the Roman world as scandalous, obscene, grotesque. The ultimate offensiveness, though, was to one particular people: Jesus' own. The Jews, unlike their rulers, did not believe that a man might become a god; they believed that there was only the one almighty, eternal deity. Creator of the heavens and the earth, he was worshipped by them as the Most High God, the Lord of Hosts, the Master of all the Earth. Empires were his to order; mountains to melt like wax. That such a god, of all gods, might have had a son, and that this son, suffering the fate of a slave, might have been tortured to death on a cross, were claims as stupefying as they were, to most Jews, repellent. No more shocking

a reversal of their most devoutly held assumptions could possibly have been imagined. Not merely blasphemy, it was madness.

Even those who did come to acknowledge Jesus as '*Christos*', the Anointed One of the Lord God, might flinch at staring the manner of his death full in the face. 'Christians', as they were called, were as wise to the connotations of crucifixion as anyone. 'The mystery of the cross, which summons us to God, is something despised and dishonourable.'¹⁵ So wrote Justin, the foremost Christian apologist of his generation, a century and a half after the birth of Jesus. The torture of the Son of the Most High God was a horror simply too shocking to be portrayed in visual form. Scribes copying the gospels might on occasion draw above the Greek word for 'cross' delicate pictograms that hinted at the crucified Christ, but otherwise it was left to sorcerers or satirists to illustrate his execution. Yet this, to many across the Roman world, was not as deep a paradox as perhaps it might have seemed. So profound were some mysteries that mortals had no choice but to keep them veiled. The naked radiance of the gods was far too dazzling for the human eye. No one, by contrast, had been blinded by the spectacle of the Son of the Most High God being tortured to death; but Christians, although accustomed to make the sign of the cross as a gesture of piety, and to contemplate with wide-eyed reverence the gospel accounts of their Saviour's sufferings, seem to have shrunk from seeing them represented in physical form.

Only centuries after the death of Jesus – by which time, astonishingly, even the Caesars had been brought to acknowledge him as Christ – did his execution at last start to emerge as an acceptable theme for artists. By ad 400 the cross was ceasing to be viewed as something shameful. Banned as a punishment decades earlier by Constantine, the first Christian emperor, crucifixion had come to serve the Roman people as an emblem of triumph over sin and death. An artist, carving the scene out of ivory, might represent Jesus in the skimpy loincloth of an athlete, no less muscled than any of the ancient gods. Even as the western half of the empire began to slip away from the rule of the Caesars, and fall to barbarian invaders, so in the eastern half, where Roman power endured, the Cross provided assurance to an embattled people that victory would ultimately be theirs. In Christ's agonies had been the index of his defeat of evil. This was why, triumphant even on the implement of his torture, he was never shown as suffering pain. His expression was one of serenity. It proclaimed him Lord of the Universe.

So it was, in an empire that – although today we call it Byzantine – never ceased to insist that it was Roman, a corpse came to serve as an icon of majesty. Byzantium, though, was not the only Christian realm. In the Latin-speaking West, a millennium and more after the birth of Christ, a fresh revolution was brewing. Increasingly, there were Christians who, rather than keeping the brute horror of crucifixion from their gaze, yearned instead to fix their eyes fully upon it. 'Why, O my soul, did you fail to be there, to be stabbed by a sword of bitter grief, that you could not endure the piercing of your Saviour's side by a spear? Why could you not bear to see the nails violate the hands and feet of your Creator?'¹⁶ This prayer, written some time around ad 1070, was not just to the God who reigned in glory on high, but to the condemned criminal he had been when he suffered his humiliating death. Its author, a brilliant scholar from northern Italy by the name of Anselm, was a man of noble birth: a correspondent of countesses, an associate of kings. Such it was to be a prince of the Church: the

ecclesia or ‘assembly’ of the Christian people. Anselm was a man who combined birth, ability and a famous name. Nevertheless, even as he laboured to sway the destiny of Christendom, he could not help but find in his own eminence a cause of dread. So upset was he when appointed to lead the English Church that he promptly suffered a spectacular nosebleed. ‘The very name of private property was to him a thing of horror.’¹⁷ Seeing a cornered hare, he burst into tears, and bade the terrified animal be set free. No matter how high in the affairs of the world he rose, he never forgot that it was in lowliness, and nakedness, and persecution that his Saviour had redeemed him. In his prayer to the crucified Christ, copied as it was and read across the whole of the Latin West, Anselm articulated a new and momentous understanding of the Christian God: one in which the emphasis was laid not upon his triumph, but upon his suffering humanity.

‘With this lament, suddenly, shockingly, we are in the presence of rupture . . .’¹⁸ The Jesus portrayed by medieval artists, twisted, bloody, dying, was a victim of crucifixion such as his original executioners would have recognised: no longer serene and victorious, but racked by agony, just as any tortured slave would have been. The response to the spectacle, however, was far removed from the mingled revulsion and disdain that had typified that of the ancients to crucifixion. Men and women, when they looked upon an image of their Lord fixed to the cross, upon the nails smashed through the tendons and bone of his feet, upon the arms stretched so tightly as to appear torn from their sockets, upon the slump of his thorn-crowned head onto his chest, did not feel contempt, but rather compassion, and pity, and fear. There was certainly no lack of Christians, in medieval Europe, to identify with the sufferings of their God. Rich still trampled down poor. Gibbets stood on hills. The Church itself, thanks in large part to the exertions of men like Anselm, was able to lay claim to the ancient primacy of Rome – and uphold it, what was more. And yet, for all that, something fundamental had indeed changed. ‘Patience in tribulation, offering the other cheek, praying for one’s enemies, loving those who hate us’:¹⁹ such were the Christian virtues as defined by Anselm. All derived from the recorded sayings of Jesus himself. No Christians, then, not even the most callous or unheeding, could ignore them without some measure of reproof from their consciences. That the Son of God, born of a woman, and sentenced to the death of a slave, had perished unrecognised by his judges, was a reflection fit to give pause to even the haughtiest monarch. This awareness, enshrined as it was in the very heart of medieval Christianity, could not help but lodge in its consciousness a visceral and momentous suspicion: that God was closer to the weak than to the mighty, to the poor than to the rich. Any beggar, any criminal, might be Christ. ‘So the last will be first, and the first last.’²⁰

To the Roman aristocrats who, in the decades before the birth of Jesus, first began to colonise the Esquiline Hill with their marble fittings and their flower beds, such a sentiment would have seemed grotesque. And yet it had come to pass. Nowhere bore more spectacular witness to this than Rome itself. In 1601, in a church that had originally been built to exorcise the ghost of Nero, a particularly flamboyant and malignant Caesar, a painting was installed that paid homage to the outcast origins of the city’s Christian order. The artist, a young man from Milan by the name of Caravaggio, had been commissioned to paint a crucifixion: not of Christ himself, but of his leading disciple. Peter, a fisherman who, according to the gospels, had abandoned his boat and nets to follow Jesus, was said to have become the ‘overseer’ – the *episcopos* or ‘bishop’ – of the first Christians of Rome, before

being put to death by Nero. Since Peter's execution, more than two hundred men had held the bishopric, an office that brought with it a claim to primacy over the entire Church, and the honorary title of *Pappas* or 'Father' – 'Pope'. Over the course of the fifteen centuries and more that had followed Peter's death, the authority of the popes had waxed and waned; but it remained, in the lifetime of Caravaggio, a formidable thing. The artist, however, knew better than to celebrate its pomp, its splendour, its wealth. The earthly greatness of the papacy was turned literally on its head. Peter, the story went, had demanded to be crucified upside down, so as not to share in the fate of his Lord; and Caravaggio, choosing as his theme the very moment when the heavy cross was levered upwards, portrayed the first pope as he had authentically been – as a peasant. No ancient artist would have thought to honour a Caesar by representing him as Caravaggio represented Peter: tortured, humiliated, stripped almost bare. And yet, in the city of the Caesars, it was a man broken to such a fate who was honoured as the keeper of 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven'.²¹ The last had indeed become first.

The relationship of Christianity to the world that gave birth to it is, then, paradoxical. The faith is at once the most enduring legacy of classical antiquity, and the index of its utter transformation. Formed of a great confluence of traditions – Persian and Jewish, Greek and Roman – it has long survived the collapse of the empire from which it first emerged, to become, in the words of one Jewish scholar, 'the most powerful of hegemonic cultural systems in the history of the world'.²² In the Middle Ages, no civilisation in Eurasia was as congruent with a single dominant set of beliefs as was the Latin West with its own distinctive form of Christianity. Elsewhere, whether in the lands of Islam, or in India, or in China, there were various understandings of the divine, and numerous institutions that served to define them; but in Europe, in the lands that acknowledged the primacy of the pope, there was only the occasional community of Jews to disrupt the otherwise total monopoly of the Roman Church. Such exclusivity was sternly guarded. Those who disturbed it, and refused to repent, might expect to be silenced, expelled or put to death. A Church that worshipped a God executed by heedless authorities presided over what has aptly been termed 'a persecuting society'.* Here, in the conviction that beliefs served to define a man or woman, was yet a further index of the transformative impact of the Christian revolution. That Christians had been willing to die as witnesses for their beliefs, as martyrs, was precisely what had marked them out to the Roman authorities as sinister and aberrant. All that, though, had changed. Time had seen the subversive prevail. In medieval Christendom, the bones of martyrs were treasured, and it was the Church that patrolled belief. To be human was to be Christian; to be Christian was to believe.

Well might the Roman Church have termed itself 'catholic': 'universal'. There was barely a rhythm of life that it did not define. From dawn to dusk, from midsummer to the depths of winter, from the hour of their birth to the very last drawing of their breath, the men and women of medieval Europe absorbed its assumptions into their bones. Even when, in the century before Caravaggio, Catholic Christendom began to fragment, and new forms of Christianity to emerge, the conviction of Europeans that their faith was universal remained deep-rooted. It inspired them in their exploration of continents undreamed of by their forefathers; in their conquest of those that they were able to seize, and reconsecrate as a Promised Land; in their attempt to convert the inhabitants of those that they were

not. Whether in Korea or in Tierra del Fuego, in Alaska or in New Zealand, the cross on which Jesus had been tortured to death came to serve as the most globally recognised symbol of a god that there has ever been. ‘Thou hast rebuked the nations, thou hast destroyed the wicked; thou hast blotted out their name for ever and ever.’²³ The man who greeted the news of the Japanese surrender in 1945 by quoting scripture and offering up praise to Christ was not Truman, nor Churchill, nor de Gaulle, but the Chinese leader, Chiang Kai-shek. Even in the twenty-first century, as the tide of Western dominance palpably retreats, assumptions bred of Europe’s ancestral faith continue to structure the way that the world organises itself. Whether in North Korea or in the command structures of jihadi terrorist cells, there are few so ideologically opposed to the West that they are not sometimes obliged to employ the international dating system. Whenever they do so, they are subliminally reminded of the claims made by Christianity about the birth of Jesus. Time itself has been Christianised.

How was it that a cult inspired by the execution of an obscure criminal in a long-vanished empire came to exercise such a transformative and enduring influence on the world? To attempt an answer to this question, as I do in this book, is not to write a history of Christianity. Rather than provide a panoramic survey of its evolution, I have sought instead to trace the currents of Christian influence that have spread most widely, and been most enduring into the present day. That is why – although I have written extensively about the Eastern and Orthodox Churches elsewhere, and find them themes of immense wonder and fascination – I have chosen not to trace their development beyond antiquity. My ambition is hubristic enough as it is: to explore how we in the West came to be what we are, and to think the way that we do. The moral and imaginative upheaval that saw Jesus enshrined as a god by the same imperial order that had tortured him to death did not bring to an end the capacity of Christianity for inspiring profound transformations in societies. Quite the opposite. Already, by the time that Anselm died in 1109, Latin Christendom had been set upon a course so distinctive that what today we term ‘the West’ is less its heir than its continuation. Certainly, to dream of a world transformed by a reformation, or an enlightenment, or a revolution is nothing exclusively modern. Rather, it is to dream as medieval visionaries dreamed: to dream in the manner of a Christian.

Today, at a time of seismic geopolitical realignment, when our values are proving to be not nearly as universal as some of us had assumed them to be, the need to recognise just how culturally contingent they are is more pressing than ever. To live in a Western country is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions. This is no less true for Jews or Muslims than it is for Catholics or Protestants. Two thousand years on from the birth of Christ, it does not require a belief that he rose from the dead to be stamped by the formidable – indeed the inescapable – influence of Christianity. Whether it be the conviction that the workings of conscience are the surest determinants of good law, or that Church and state exist as distinct entities, or that polygamy is unacceptable, its trace elements are to be found everywhere in the West. Even to write about it in a Western language is to use words shot through with Christian connotations. ‘Religion’, ‘secular’, ‘atheist’: none of these are neutral. All, though they derive from the classical past, come freighted with the legacy of Christendom. Fail to appreciate this, and the risk is always of anachronism. The West, increasingly empty though the pews may be, remains firmly moored to its Christian past.

There are those who will rejoice at this proposition; and there are those who will be appalled by it. Christianity may be the most enduring and influential legacy of the ancient world, and its emergence the single most transformative development in Western history, but it is also the most challenging for a historian to write about. In the West, and particularly in the United States, it remains easily the dominant faith. Worldwide, over two billion people – almost a third of the planet's population – subscribe to it. Unlike Osiris, or Zeus, or Odin, the Christian God still goes strong. The tradition of interpreting the past as the tracing of patterns upon time by his forefinger – a tradition that reaches back to the very beginnings of the faith – is far from dead. The crucifixion of Jesus, to all those many millions who worship him as the Son of the Lord God, the Creator of heaven and earth, was not merely an event in history, but the very pivot around which the cosmos turns. Historians, however, no matter how alert they may be to the potency of this understanding, and to the way in which it has swayed the course of the world's affairs, are not in the business of debating whether it is actually true. Instead, they study Christianity for what it can reveal, not about God, but about the affairs of humanity. No less than any other aspect of culture and society, beliefs are presumed to be of mortal origin, and shaped by the passage of time. To look to the supernatural for explanations of what happened in the past is to engage in apologetics: a perfectly reputable pursuit, but not history as today, in the modern West, it has come to be understood.

Yet if historians of Christianity must negotiate faith, so also must they negotiate doubt. It is not only believers whose interpretation of Christian history is liable to be something deeply personal to them. The same can be equally true of sceptics. In 1860, in one of the first public discussions of Charles Darwin's recently published *On the Origin of Species*, the Bishop of Oxford notoriously mocked the theory that human beings might be the product of evolution. Now, though, the boot is on the other foot. 'It is the case that since we are all 21st century people, we all subscribe to a pretty widespread consensus of what's right and what's wrong.'²⁴ So Richard Dawkins, the world's most evangelical atheist, has declared. To argue that, in the West, the 'pretty widespread consensus of what's right and what's wrong' derives principally from Christian teachings and presumptions can risk seeming, in societies of many faiths and none, almost offensive. Even in America, where Christianity remains far more vibrant a force than it does in Europe, growing numbers have come to view the West's ancestral faith as something outmoded: a relic of earlier, more superstitious times. Just as the Bishop of Oxford refused to consider that he might be descended from an ape, so now are many in the West reluctant to contemplate that their values, and even their very lack of belief, might be traceable back to Christian origins.

I assert this with a measure of confidence because, until quite recently, I shared in this reluctance. Although as a boy I was taken every Sunday to church by my mother, and would solemnly say my prayers at night, I found myself at an early age experiencing what I can now recognise as having been an almost Victorian crisis of faith. I still remember the shock I felt when, at Sunday school one day, I opened a children's Bible and found an illustration on its first page of Adam and Eve with a brachiosaur. Respectful of Bible stories I may have been, but of one thing – to my regret – I was rock-solid certain: no human being had ever seen a sauropod. That the teacher seemed not to care about this error only compounded my sense of outrage and perplexity. Had there been dinosaurs in the

Garden of Eden? My teacher seemed neither to know nor to care. A faint shadow of doubt had been brought to darken my confidence in the truth of what I was being taught about the Christian faith.

With time, it darkened further still. My obsession with dinosaurs – glamorous, ferocious, extinct – evolved seamlessly into an obsession with ancient empires. When I read the Bible, the focus of my fascination was less the children of Israel or Jesus and his disciples than their adversaries: the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Romans. In a similar manner, although I vaguely continued to believe in God, I found him infinitely less charismatic than the gods of the Greeks: Apollo, Athena, Dionysus. I liked the way that they did not lay down laws, or condemn other deities as demons; I liked their rock-star glamour. As a result, by the time I came to read Edward Gibbon and his great history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, I was more than ready to accept his interpretation of the triumph of Christianity: that it had ushered in an ‘age of superstition and credulity’.²⁵ My childhood instinct to see the biblical God as the po-faced enemy of liberty and fun was rationalised. The defeat of paganism had ushered in the reign of Nobodaddy, and of all the various crusaders, inquisitors and black-hatted Puritans who had served as his acolytes. Colour and excitement had been drained from the world. ‘Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean,’ wrote the Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, echoing the apocryphal lament of Julian the Apostate, the last pagan emperor of Rome. ‘The world has grown grey from thy breath.’²⁶ Instinctively, I agreed.

Yet over the course of the past two decades, my perspective has changed. When I came to write my first works of history, I chose as my themes the two periods that had always most stirred and moved me as a child: the Persian invasions of Greece and the last decades of the Roman Republic. The years that I spent writing these twin studies of the classical world, living intimately in the company of Leonidas and of Julius Caesar, of the hoplites who had died at Thermopylae and of the legionaries who had crossed the Rubicon, only confirmed me in my fascination: for Sparta and Rome, even when subjected to the minutest historical enquiry, retained their glamour as apex predators. They continued to stalk my imaginings as they had always done: like a great white shark, like a tiger, like a tyrannosaur. Yet giant carnivores, however wondrous, are by their nature terrifying. The more years I spent immersed in the study of classical antiquity, so the more alien I increasingly found it. The values of Leonidas, whose people had practised a peculiarly murderous form of eugenics and trained their young to kill uppity *Untermenschen* by night, were nothing that I recognised as my own; nor were those of Caesar, who was reported to have killed a million Gauls, and enslaved a million more. It was not just the extremes of callousness that unsettled me, but the complete lack of any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value. Why did I find this disturbing? Because, in my morals and ethics, I was not a Spartan or a Roman at all. That my belief in God had faded over the course of my teenage years did not mean that I had ceased to be Christian. For a millennium and more, the civilisation into which I had been born was Christendom. Assumptions that I had grown up with – about how a society should properly be organised, and the principles that it should uphold – were not bred of classical antiquity, still less of ‘human nature’, but very distinctively of that civilisation’s Christian past. So profound has been the impact of Christianity on the development of Western civilisation that it has come to be hidden from view. It is the incomplete revolutions which are remembered; the fate of those which triumph is to be taken for granted.

The ambition of *Dominion* is to trace the course of what one Christian, writing in the third century ad, termed ‘the flood-tide of Christ’:²⁷ how the belief that the Son of the one God of the Jews had been tortured to death on a cross came to be so enduringly and widely held that today most of us in the West are dulled to just how scandalous it originally was. This book explores what it was that made Christianity so subversive and disruptive; how completely it came to saturate the mindset of Latin Christendom; and why, in a West that is often doubtful of religion’s claims, so many of its instincts remain – for good and ill – thoroughly Christian.

It is – to coin a phrase – the greatest story ever told.