10. ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Continuity and renewal are fundamental forces affecting the history of art, just as they affect human society generally. On the side of continuity, linking era to era, is the inertia of tradition, a handing over of knowledge and customs from generation to generation. Although tradition is a conservative force, it is not impervious to change, as shifts in the social, psychological, and physical environments make their demands upon it. The result is a renewal or refreshment of continuity through change. Iconography—that aspect of art history which deals with the subject matter and meaning of a work of art—is largely on the side of tradition, yet it is constantly undergoing those transformations that adapt it to new conditions. This process of continuity and renewal is nowhere better exemplified than in the development of Christian iconography, wherein a new religious movement found images expressive of its ideas and rituals, and found them chiefly in existing types to which a new context and sometimes altered meanings were applied.

This selection from André Grabar's *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* vividly traces developments that join images in the art of a new faith to the non-Christian world from which it emerged. For further information on the subject, the reader is referred to the introduction accompanying the selection by Emile Mâle on medieval iconography (p. 327). The reader may wish to consult, in relation to the following selection, P. V. C. Baur, "The Paintings in the Christian

Chapel," *The Excavations at Dura-Europus Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters: Preliminary Report of the Fifth Season of Work, October 1931–March 1932*, edited by M. I. Rostovtzeff (1934) and C. H. Kraeling, the Final Report of this study, Vol. VIII, Part 1: *The Synagogue*, edited by A. R. Bellinger and others (1956). A good survey of this subject is Ann Perkins, *The Art of Dura-Europus* (1973). There is also M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Dura-Europus and Its Art* (1938).

Since this selection points out relationships between Jewish and Christian iconography, the reader may also wish to consult the important study by E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Graeco-Roman Period*, 12 vols. (1953–65). A good survey of Christian art in its infancy is André Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art*, tr. by Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons (1967).

From its beginnings Christian imagery found expression entirely, almost uniquely, in the general language of the visual arts and with the techniques of imagery commonly practiced within the Roman Empire from the second to the fourth century. . . . An incalculable number of features, inseparable from the Greco-Roman imagery of the Empire, passed into the Christian iconographic language just as naturally and inevitably as words, expressions, and syntactical or metrical constructions of the first centuries of our era—of Aramaean, Greek, or Latin—passed into the language of Christian theologians.

Christian iconography, it is true, came into being only about two centuries after the foundation of Christianity, when the religion had been defined and propagated by means of the word. But, except for the difference in time, the use commonly made of means of expression and diffusion by the Christian authors or by the Christian image-makers of late antiquity was the same: they expressed themselves in the language—visual or verbal—that was used around them.

This is only natural. But it means, a priori, that, with regard to Christian imagery, the great majority of its distinguishing features were neither created nor invented by the makers of the first Christian images. Almost everything in their work was dictated by the models they followed; and it was actually because of this that the new, Christian images they created were understandable to their contemporaries, and therefore effectively achieved the ends intended. . . .

Except for a few themes peculiar to itself, Paleo-Christian iconography has no terms of its own. . . .

THE FIRST STEPS

The earliest Christian images appeared somewhere about the year 200. This means that during roughly a century and a half the

Christians did without any figurative representations of a religious character. It almost seems a pity, since this rejection of images—never proclaimed *expressis verbis* by the theologians—leaves us without archaeological testimony as to the spiritual state and reigning disputes of the Christian communities before the year 200. We date the oldest Christian paintings of the catacombs to about 200, and the oldest representational sculptures on Christian sarcophagi to the first third of the third century, even though we know that this chronology is rather insecure, since it does not rest on dated written documents. In fact, a number of topographical, stylistic, and iconographic features indicate that the earliest subterranean mausoleums in Rome, those of Domitilla, Calixtus (crypt of Lucina), Priscilla, etc., are close in date and generally slightly later than the year 200. The first funerary frescoes of Naples and Nola are more or less contemporary with those in Rome. The first sarcophagi with Christian subjects, those of Rome and Provence, belong to about 230; and the mural paintings of the chapel (baptistery) unearthed in the little Roman garrison town of Dura-Europos, on the middle Euphrates, on the Persian frontier, are also of about 230. It is from these monuments that we will take our first examples of Christian images. . . .

Let us consider some examples of painting in the Roman catacombs, choosing them from among the earliest. What one notices first in these funerary hypogea is that the ceilings, and sometimes the walls, are divided into compartments by a pattern of straight and curving lines. This framework of decorative lines is aesthetically predominant in the paintings of the catacombs and is very characteristic of that art which, in the midst of the cemetery, tended to gaiety.

Some of the figures, generally very small (they were to become larger only in the fourth century), are no less attractive; this funerary art goes beyond the fears and sorrows of death and puts on an air of gladness. The little figures isolated in the centers of their delicately framed fields represent orants or Good Shepherds whose decorative effect seems more important to the painters than the meaning, for they use them as motifs that they alternate within their designs. The figures are, however, allegories of the soul of the pious believer and of Christ as the shepherd. . . . But the catacomb painters have not deviated from a pleasing manner, and all of the figures show the imprint of this attitude. In the same

agreeable tone they paint a Daniel in the lions' den, a resurrection of Lazarus, Noah in the ark, or the Adoration of the Magi: the protagonists are young and graceful, with elegant gestures and noble mien. And it is rare to find one of these paintings that does not reproduce a conventional scheme. . . .

This art is an easygoing one, indifferent to detail, to the individual expression of the figure, to the precise traits of a face. One finds uncompleted architecture, and surprising negligence in Biblical images of a narrative character. But these paintings of the catacombs are not meant to represent events—they only suggest them. It is enough to indicate one or two salient features, in order to designate a specific person, event, or object. . . . In other words, the paintings are schematic—that is, they are image-signs, which appeal above all to the intellect and which imply more than they actually show. . . . It is imperative that the sign be unequivocally decipherable. We know, of course, that the frequent use of any sign in a certain context permits surprising abbreviations. One may cite the famous paintings in the crypt of Lucina which show a fish that serves as a support for a small basket filled with white ring-shaped objects. The Christians who went there knew how to decipher such a painting: communion.

And they knew, too, that the image of the fisherman alluded to Christ and to the apostles, fishermen of souls. But in some cases the brevity is certainly excessive, as when, for example, a scene that represents a meal of some kind has no detail that would distinguish between the Multiplication of the Loaves, the Miracle of Cana, the Last Supper, or the repast in paradise beyond the tomb. Those who planned the mural paintings in the catacombs were probably not entirely averse to a certain ambiguity in their image-signs, since the Multiplication of the Loaves, for example, was regarded as a symbol of the agapae of paradise or a figuration of the Last Supper. . . .

. . . The image-signs that fill the Paleo–Christian catacombs and sarcophagi are of two kinds with respect to their semantic value. A limited number of iconographic signs represent the two major sacraments of the Christian Church, baptism and communion. The majority of the others serve as references to or citations of divine intervention for the salvation or preservation of certain believers: the preservation of Noah, during the Deluge; the deliverance of Isaac, when Abraham would have sacrificed his son;

the deliverance of Daniel from the lions or the three Hebrews from the furnace; or, from gospel narratives, Lazarus restored to life by Jesus or the paralytic cured, shown carrying his bed.

When these highly schematized scenes are painted in the catacombs or carved on sarcophagi, their presence next to the body of the dead has the same meaning as the prayer of the burial office called the *commendatio animae*: they enumerate the precedents for divine intervention for one of the faithful, and express the desire that God may exercise the same benignity toward the person who is now dead: God, save him, as you saved Daniel, Noah, etc. . . . Prayers of this kind, which seem to have served mostly for individual worship and even for magical invocations, probably go back to Jewish versions. It is even possible that the image-signs of some of these Biblical salvations or deliverances were first created by the Jews for their own use. Jewish examples of deliverance—Abraham, from sacrifice of his son Isaac; Noah; and Daniel—are known. But whether the Christians knew, at the beginning, image-signs of Jewish making or only Jewish prayers with the formula: Save me as you have saved Noah, etc., the great proportion of veterotestamentary salvations in the catacombs and on the sarcophagi, but especially in the catacombs, makes it very probable that there was some initial Jewish contribution. . . .

The psychological intent is slightly different when, instead of the precedents for salvation, one of the sacraments is represented —baptism or communion. . . . Here, obviously, there can be no question about Hebraic influences, nor about the formula: Save me as you have saved others. These images, found only in sepulchral art, serve to point out that the deceased was a Christian by representing the two sacraments. It is no longer only the intervention of God but participation in the sacraments of the Church which assures the salvation of the dead.

The Christian imagery of allusive signs employed, astutely enough, only a very limited number of figures, and this saved it from confusion. Nevertheless, it is surprising, if we think of pagan usage at the time, and of funerary art in the Middle Ages, to see how small a place is devoted to Christ in the earliest Christian art or to symbols that would stand for Christ. This applies to Paleo-Christian art before the edicts of tolerance (A.D. 313). At this early time, the Saviour appeared only in the guise of various

allegorical images, which had remarkably few individual traits. There was chiefly the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb, which signified that the shepherd, an allegory for Jesus, saves the lamb, an allegory for the Christian soul. The image-makers made no attempt to be more specific. Like the ceilings of the catacombs, the façades of certain sarcophagi line up three Good Shepherds; and these may have, indifferently, the features of an adolescent or a bearded man of ripe age. Without going into examples that show how the image of St. Peter was influenced by these allegorical images of Christ, it can be said that as a general rule these allegorical images were relatively abstract, on principle; for in pagan Roman art . . . the figure of the shepherd carrying the lamb was a symbol of philanthropy—*humanitas*. . . .

Christ as the Good Shepherd has a counterpart in the deceased as orant. This is evident in the earliest catacombs and on the façades of Paleo-Christian sarcophagi. The pagan symbolism of the Romans had used the same orant to signify *pietas*; thus, here again, Christian art began by representing abstractions not only to designate Christ but also to characterize the ordinary Christian. . . . A second allegorical figure for Christ (or his forerunner Job), the philosopher, . . . occurs as early as the Good Shepherd. This allegory, unlike the Good Shepherd, was afterward quickly forgotten, and this is why it is more difficult for us to recognize an allegorical representation of Christ in the figure of the philosopher on the Christian sarcophagi. But modern exegesis leaves no doubt that the bearded man with the nude or seminude torso in an exomis tunic, shown seated on a stool, often reading a book, is certainly Christ as the true philosopher. . . .

In the oldest catacombs, images of salvation taken from the Old Testament predominate; there are, however, a few instances of the Christ-Thaumaturge, particularly in the representation of the resurrection of Lazarus. But the catacombs and the sarcophagus reliefs of the fourth century freely multiply instances of the miracles of Jesus. What seems to have happened is that the image-makers and their clients grew increasingly conscious of the idea of a more personal image of Jesus, this individualization developing through his thaumaturgical works. However, before multiplying the miracles of Jesus, the early image-makers often reproduced a single scene of his infancy, the Adoration of the Magi. . . . The image of the Adoration of the Magi replaces the whole

Christological cycle. It is the iconographic sign that indicates the principal argument in favor of the salvation of each believer: the fact of the Saviour's Incarnation and his work on earth.

... Christians at ... the period of their first iconographic efforts perhaps used images to express theological ideas. They were close to this when they represented the two principal sacraments of the Church, baptism and communion, in their funerary art at Rome. ... Images of the sacraments, whether purely symbolic (fish and bread) or descriptive (scenes of the baptism of an anonymous neophyte and of meals taken in common) or Biblical, with allusions to the sacraments (the baptism of Christ, the Multiplication of the Loaves, the Last Supper), contain also in germinal form an affirmation of dogma.

The same thing is true of other Biblical scenes that we have classed among the images which, besides the sacraments, define the religion of the deceased; for example, Adam and Eve with the serpent, and the Epiphany (the Adoration of the Magi). For these evidently contain another affirmation of essential Christian dogmas, original sin and redemption.

Having pointed out these incursions that the first Christian iconography made into the area of dogma, we should stress the fact that the number of images of this kind, and the number of dogmatic themes that they referred to, was extremely limited in comparison with allegorical figures and representations of salvation. This is particularly true for the catacombs. The sarcophagi of the fourth century attempt more in the way of the iconography of dogma. ...

... Early Christian art in its Eastern branch furnishes one remarkable case, unique at the period, of a cycle of mural paintings in which both the subjects and their arrangement proclaim their dogmatic character. These are the mural paintings of a small baptistery of about 230, one of the group of rooms set apart for the Christian cult in a private house in the town of Dura-Europos.

Discovered shortly after World War I, the portion of the baptistery that remains was removed to the Yale University Art Gallery, where, with its frescoes, it has been reconstructed. The date of this building and its paintings cannot be disputed, and thus we know, thanks to the Dura baptistery, that from the reign of Severus the Christians had cult buildings in Roman cities, even though their religion was unlawful, and that they had at their

command a relatively rich religious iconography. It is not known whether the existence of such buildings was peculiar to the eastern provinces of the Empire, but there is no reason to assume that it was. We know that places of Christian worship, along with every-thing in them, were totally destroyed everywhere during the persecutions of the third century and the beginning of the fourth. It is pure chance that saved some portions of the baptistery of Dura; the building was buried deliberately, about 256, by the defenders of the fortified Roman town, on the eve of a Parthian attack, to reinforce the adjacent city walls; the burial, intended to be temporary, became permanent when the Parthians took the town in 256, and the building was not rebuilt.

The iconographic program of the baptistery of Dura is not necessarily one that was peculiar to the Semitic Christians of northern Syria. But whatever its place of origin, it is distinguished from the iconographic ensembles of the catacombs by the rela-tionship that it establishes between its subjects and their arrange-ment on the walls, with certain subjects manifestly taking priority over others. The hierarchy established by the location of the images is emphasized by differences in proportions and in tech-niques. Thus the scene of Adam and Eve, which in the catacombs may be placed anywhere among the salvations and without any topographical relationship to the Good Shepherd, is treated differently in the baptistery of Dura. The most central spot in the room, the niche of the *chevet* (behind the font), is reserved for two images, Adam and Eve and the Good Shepherd with His Flock. In other words, images representing the essential dogmas of original sin and redemption are made central by their location; and furthermore, for obvious reasons, it is the image of redemp-tion, in the form of the Good Shepherd and His Flock, that pre-dominates. While the image of original sin takes up only a corner of the niche, at the bottom, the idyllic image of salvation stretches over the rest of the wall.

All the walls of the baptistery were covered with paintings, and as less than half of them remain it is impossible to know the scope of the entire iconographic program. Perhaps it is chance that, in the extant part, evangelical scenes predominate (four to one), whereas in the earliest catacombs of Rome and the Campagna, it is clearly the Old Testament that is pre-eminent. But at Dura the remaining fragments testify that the images were intended to

celebrate the baptismal rite: the Samaritan woman at the well and the miracle of Christ walking on the water evoke the theme of water essential to the office of baptism. We are also shown the victory of David over Goliath, the healing of the paralytic, and, naturally, the Resurrection of Christ (the theme being translated iconographically by the scene of the holy women at the tomb).

On this point a comparison is permissible with the catacomb paintings, which surely owe their numerous images of salvation to the office for the burial of the dead. The idea that inspired the Jewish and Christian prayers, as well as the Paleo-Christian liturgical offices which followed them, produced similar results in the catacombs of Rome and in the third-century baptistery at Dura. In praying for the dead or for the neophyte, the Christians constantly went back to evocations of salvation or deliverance and, consequently, to the idea of an appeal to divine power (at Dura: the victory of David over Goliath; the miracle of St. Peter, whom Jesus saves from drowning; the miracle of the paralytic cured). This is the reason for the use, both in the catacombs and in the baptistery, of images whose religious import is identical. As for the Resurrection of Christ, essential to the offices of both baptism and burial, though images of it are still wanting in the catacombs, they are frequent and important on the sarcophagi from the fourth century on. On this point also, therefore, the practices of the image-makers of about 230 at Dura and of the third and fourth centuries in the West are fairly closely allied. One might even suggest that in the place reserved for the mystery of Christian initiation, just as in the burial grounds, the images were intended to do more than recall events of the past: they were intended in some sense to perpetuate the intervention of God, as seen in these instances, for the benefit of the neophytes, just as the sacraments did.

... The painters who worked at Dura must have had an iconographic repertory that did not entirely correspond to that available to their Roman counterparts. And if we observe the interpretation of the gospel scenes, we have the same impression of a tradition that is certainly quite close, but distinct: the miracle of the paralytic is presented in two successive episodes (before and after the cure). These scenes, as well as the scene of St. Peter drawn from the waters of the lake, are treated in a more descrip-

tive manner than the salvations of the catacombs. . . . Finally, two different styles are used for the images in the nave, depending upon their location: those on the upper part of the walls (the miracles) are rapidly sketched on a white ground with small figures that are drawn rather than painted; those on the socle (the Resurrection can be identified) have monumental proportions and present large figures completely painted and worked into a solemn and majestic rhythm. These differences in the translation of subjects according to their position on the walls were inherited by the Christian painters of Dura from their pagan predecessors, perhaps from the mural painters of the eastern provinces of Europe, to judge from some examples of frescoes of a similar kind (of the third and fourth centuries) at Kerch, once the Greek colony of Panticapaeum, on the Black Sea. They have the same graphic sketches on a white ground at the top of the walls and sometimes the same monumental figures on the socle.

So far as we can judge from what remains of the baptistery of Dura, it reveals primarily the fact, unsuspected before this discovery, that rooms devoted to the celebration of the Christian cult and decorated with iconographic paintings existed almost a century before the edicts of tolerance. The style of these mural paintings and the manner of adapting figurative painting to the walls prove that their authors followed usages known from earlier pagan examples in the eastern provinces of the Empire. But the painters of the baptistery of Dura followed a system in the choice and distribution of the Christian subjects that they represented, and this surely implies that there existed in the region of Dura slightly earlier Christian antecedents (perhaps coinciding in date with the earliest Christian paintings in the catacombs of Rome). The Roman catacomb paintings resemble the Dura frescoes in a general way, as much as contemporary works created within the Greco-Roman world resemble each other. But the relationship, as we have said, is not very close, since Dura's tendency is toward more descriptive figurations, while the Roman catacombs long held to image-signs that were as abbreviated as possible. But at Naples and Nola the Christian frescoes of the same period were more descriptive, closer to the type of Dura. Furthermore, the painters of Dura were entirely indifferent to the decorative effects which the Roman painters never lost from view. . . .

The iconography of the funerary cycles of the third century at

Rome and in Provence and that of the baptismal cycle at Dura are related, as we have said, by their common religious theme: the power of God which assures the salvation of true believers. In both cases, the Good Shepherd (taken from the Gospels) is depicted, and stories of salvation drawn from the Scriptures are also evoked, forming a counterpart to the prayers of the services. It would seem that in both cases the iconography says the same thing, or nearly the same; and, in spite of the difference in the offices which inspired the iconography, the images correspond to the respective offices. All of which means that the inspiration of the first Christian art is liturgical, and belongs exclusively to those offices which concern the individual rather than the entire community: the services of baptism and the burial of the dead.

. . . Christianity was not alone in providing itself with an iconography in the first half of the third century. If it is surprising enough to find Christianity creating a religious figurative art after being for two centuries a religion without images, it is still more astonishing to see a shift in the same direction among the Jews. Many centuries had passed, between Moses and Septimus Severus, during which the Jews rejected any figuration of a sacred character and even any image of living beings. But now, in the first half of the third century—that is, at the same time as the earliest Christian figurations—there appear, one after another, creations of Jewish religious iconography. The first Jewish experiments are similar in character to the Christian: there are the symbolic reliefs of the synagogues of Capernaum in Galilee, followed by other analogous but later examples; the coins of Apamea, in Phrygia, struck by the Jewish community of that city and showing a scene of Noah and his wife praying before the ark which they have just left; and finally, before 243, the great cycle of religious frescoes on the walls of the synagogue of Dura, this same Dura where we saw the frescoes of the Christian baptistery.

Whatever the degree of relationship between the two iconographies, Jewish and Christian, may have been, and the causes of the interdependence of their images, the historian of Christian iconography is faced with the question: Why did the two traditionally aniconic religions, which existed side by side within the Empire, equip themselves with a religious art at the same period? In spite of all that separated them, these Jewish and Christian communities, though enemies, were far from being impervious to

influences from one another. There are a thousand proofs of this. We know especially to what extent Christian liturgy, in its beginnings, was inspired by the liturgy of the synagogue in its form and content (aside from its sacraments). Moreover, the synchronism of the appearance of sacred iconography among both Jews and Christians would be most easily explained if it were admitted that these occurrences had the same origin. If this were true, the coincidence of the dates of the earliest Christian images at Rome and at Dura would not depend upon some decision of a Christian authority, but would reflect a movement in favor of religious iconography which affected Jews and Christians alike. . . .

. . . The synagogue at Dura resembles the Christian catacombs and sarcophagi of Rome. . . . However, in contrast to the great majority of the Christian scriptural images of the third century, which are abbreviated and summary, those of the synagogue at Dura are treated as large framed pictures which describe in much detail the scene represented. And there is another essential difference: the iconographic ensemble of the Dura synagogue is unfolded on the walls of a room used for the daily liturgical ceremonies of the religious community—an enterprise which has no Christian counterpart until long after the Peace of the Church. It should not be forgotten that at the beginning of the third century the Jewish faith was authorized in the Empire, whereas the Christian religion was not, and would become legal only under Constantine.

Still more important is the difference in the significance of this image cycle, compared with the Christian cycles of the third century. As we have said, these were always concerned with the salvation of the individual. But at Dura it is the destiny of the chosen people which is the subject of the ensemble. The choice and arrangement of images show this clearly, and in this respect, too, the Jewish iconography of Dura is in advance of the iconographic programs of the Christian churches by more than a century. Without going into detail, let us recall a small number of scenes which leave no doubt of this. Among the symbolic subjects, the Temple with the Ark and the lion of Judah with Jacob's dual benediction on the tribes of Israel are predominant. Among the narrative scenes, there are: Moses leading the chosen people across the Red Sea; an entire cycle dedicated to the Ark and the Temple, which evokes a chapter in the history of God acting

among his people; the story of Esther, the benefactress of her people (here, the triumph of her brother Mordecai); the resurrection of the dead before the eyes of Ezekiel; and finally, in the center of these scenes which have for their anonymous hero the chosen people as a whole, compositions showing David the king anointed by Samuel or David enthroned. Beyond all question the great iconographic program on the walls of the synagogue of Dura is concerned with the religious interests of the whole of Israel; and whether it envisages the past or the Messianic future, its subject is always the destiny of the chosen people.

. . . However, these paintings, so different otherwise from Christian images of the third century, are at one with them in attempting to show, through each of the images, the power of God and the felicity of the faithful (here taken collectively, as the chosen people). Here, too, as for the paintings and funerary reliefs and the frescoes of the baptistery of Dura, one can cite prayers which appeal for salvation in enumerating the past favors of God (Jewish prayers such as Psalm 118). In other words, this iconography has a religious meaning very like that which we have seen in the Christian cycles of the same period, except that the salvation in question concerns the entire people chosen by Yahweh.

We can turn this conclusion around and express it the other way; an iconographic program of this kind signified, for whoever contemplated these frescoes, that the God of the Jews is great and the people who are faithful to him have not ceased to enjoy his blessings through the centuries. God has saved his people from many different calamities, he has raised the dead and blessed Israel since the beginning of time. Here again we find the theme of comfort and assurance of protection and salvation which is the theme of the Christian images of the same period; and if one is concerned with the communal life on earth and the other with the salvation of the individual after death, still all these images, Jewish and Christian, are plainly intended to comfort the beholder, and either to strengthen him in his faith or to lead him into the Christian or the Jewish religion.

These observations may help us to see more clearly the reasons for the simultaneous birth of Christian and Jewish iconography in the Severan period. In both cases, the first imagery of which we have any record asserts salvation through reference to the

experience of the past. An art which adopts this program serves to hold the faithful or to bring in new converts. Since one of them, the Jewish, seems much more evolved iconographically, and the other, the Christian, better adapted to impress different ethnic groups and at the same time more sensitive to the appeal of the growing spiritualism of the third century, it is surely the new Jewish iconography which seems to have been created first and the equally new iconography of the Christians afterward. And since each of these religions promises salvation, there is a strong possibility that the first Christian iconography came into being as a response or a counterpart to the concurrent Jewish iconography born a short while before.

Much of this is a hypothesis, which is perhaps destined never to be proved. But, whatever the exact order of their appearance may have been, the Jewish and Christian iconographies began at the same period and probably more or less simultaneously, at diverse points in the Empire, where Jewish and Christian communities lived side by side. . . .

In the early third century the Roman East and Persian Upper Mesopotamia were experiencing a time of exceptional iconographic fermentation, which extended to the art of several different faiths. On the Roman side, we have just mentioned the Christian and the Jewish activity. On the Persian side, between about 240 and 270, a new religion, that of Manes, was spreading its propaganda with the aid of images. Starting at Ctesiphon and moving from there into provinces that bordered the Empire, like the region of Dura, Manes was the first to apply this method, for which the Zoroastrians later reproached him; the method is of particular interest to us, since in late antiquity the Jewish and the Christian missions were accomplished with no recourse to images. Gathering the written testimonies, some contemporary and Manichean, others of later date and sometimes by the hands of enemies of Manes (for example, a Moslem like Firdausi in the *Shah Namah*), we can establish the following subjects for the pictures which Manes showed to his auditors: images of God; images of the Last Judgment showing the judge, the good rewarded, and the evil damned. It is amusing to think that the second occurrence of a mission which sought to impress possible converts through the spectacle of the Last Judgment concerns the Christian mission to England of St. Augustine, four centuries after Manes. We know

that Manes' successors added other images to those which Manes used, notably that of the bema or throne, which symbolized his passion and his ascension, as well as the portrait of Manes, which indicated his invisible presence at the head of his church. Placed near the bema (I imagine, on the bema), the portrait of Manes was the object of veneration or of worship. To illustrate this Manichean iconography, there remain only some miniatures, much later in date and showing strong Chinese influence, made for a manuscript written in Turkistan.

As is well known, the mission of Manes, starting from Ctesiphon, spread rapidly (in spite of the persecutions which supervened) to Persia and toward Central Asia and throughout the Roman Empire, even to Africa and Italy. This iconography must have accompanied the installation of Manichean communities everywhere and provoked repercussions. The late Wilhelm Koehler thought that the great and scholarly iconography which was created at Rome at the beginning of the fifth century under the impetus afforded it by Pope Leo the Great was a response to the very effective propaganda of Manicheism in the West.

The arts of the West encountered Manicheism only around the year 400. In the eastern provinces of the Empire and in Persia, similar and equally violent contacts occurred in the second half of the third and in the fourth century. Modern scholars in the field of iconography in Iran (Nyberg, Wikander, Puech) admit that it is to the flowering of Manicheism, with its books of divine revelation, its church, and its propaganda, that we owe the codification of traditional Mazdaism and the organization of the Zoroastrian Church, which became the state church of Persia. Further studies will, I hope, show whether the official art of this state religion, as we see it under the Sassanians, also was a reply to Manichean iconography.

We have no reason to believe that the Manichean mission, with imagery as a propaganda instrument, provoked the Jews and Christians of the Levant, inviting them to abandon their traditional rejection of figurative art. Such a hypothesis would have a very good chance of satisfying everyone and of providing an answer to the question still before us, that is: Admitting that the Christians followed the Jews and that both iconographies originated at the beginning of the third century, why did they do so *then*, rather than earlier or later? The Manichean factor would

explain everything, especially since it introduced imagery as propaganda. But—happily for the truth to which this hypothesis would have done a disservice—the dates make this answer impossible: the first Jewish and Christian images occur certainly soon after or even slightly before the year 200, while the earliest Manichean images cannot be earlier than about 240.

The Manichean evidence can, however, be used in two ways. Manes could have been led to invent an imagery for the religion which he founded, and to make it an instrument of propaganda, because the Jews and the Christians, his closest neighbors in the domain of religion, had, both of them, just created one. If this was so, one should expect to find a similarity in the three systems of imagery, particularly (which interests us the most) in the religious value one could see in them and in the uses for which they were designed in the religious life of the three communities. But, in the present state of our knowledge, all that can be asserted is that Manes judged imagery to be capable of expressing ideas and of assisting the propagation of the religion which he had founded and which he preached, beginning in Upper Mesopotamia around the year 240. The imagery that he created was destined for the crowds, and the role that the Last Judgment played in it would confirm this.

The second way of using the Manichean evidence is even more prudent. Without presupposing a link between the creation of Manichean iconography and the slightly older Jewish and Christian iconographies, one would limit oneself to pointing out the purely chronological closeness of the beginnings of all these iconographies. Whatever the order of their appearance, there is no question that they followed one another at short intervals. Three iconographies of three revealed religions appear almost simultaneously, and in each instance some of the earliest of its works of art now known—all directed to the average spectator— are found in the same frontier region between the Roman Empire and Persia, in the area of the upper Euphrates. At the beginning of the third century, religions, sects, confessional and philosophical-religious groups, favored by the Pax Romana, lived freely together in the cities of the Empire, and in the eastern provinces in particular. Roman law and prosperity favored this, as well as the intense agitation within these groups which organized, dissolved, clashed, and tore from each other their not very

stable membership. It was also Greco-Roman custom which, in this world more or less won over to Hellenism, favored a recourse to art as a means of expressing and propagating ideas. . . . The more these religions competed with each other, the more the iconographies of which they availed themselves resembled each other, because each expressed itself in terms of the same iconographic language of Greek classicism, their differences being differences only of detail.

The excavations at Dura have provided an excellent material illustration of this state of affairs and particularly of the impressive proximity of several religious iconographies, different from each other but similar in form. One has only to look at the frescoes of the sanctuaries lined up one after another along the walls of Dura: the Christian baptistery has not only the synagogue as a neighbor but also a temple of the Palmyrene gods, a Mithraeum, and the sanctuaries of Atargatis, Artemis Azzanathcona, a Semitic Zeus, another local Artemis, and Adonis. Of different dates, but not very far apart, all the paintings in these sanctuaries existed simultaneously at the time of the destruction of Dura in 243. A few years later, there would have been a Manichean sanctuary, too.

. . . The existence of imagery in the practice of some religious groups called forth the creation of other systems of imagery, all of them invented under conditions of competition and expressly for the adherents, either assured or possible, of the respective groups. The religions most firmly aniconic, Judaism and Christianity, did not resist the competition, which made its effects felt eventually in an emphasis on the distinction between the two faiths. In this respect, it is striking that at Dura the Christians gave priority to evangelical themes (whereas at Rome they emphasized motifs of the Old Testament, which they held in common with the Jews). At Dura, Christians and Jews were in competition, and their iconographic repertories underlined what was specific to each of them.

THE ASSIMILATION OF CONTEMPORARY IMAGERY

. . . One branch of late classical iconography furnished a great number of motifs for the first generations of Christian image-makers: this was pastoral imagery, whose principal motifs are the

shepherd, his dog, his flock of lambs or goats or, more rarely, his herd of cows, or a rocky landscape with a few decorative trees and sometimes a few rustic buildings. In the Roman period, such visions of pastoral calm were the delight of city dwellers, and in mural decorations in particular they were frequent. Paintings of this kind are preserved in the ruins of the Palatine and also in the elegant ancient stuccoes from a Roman house found at the Farnesina and in a great many frescoes, pavement mosaics, and reliefs going back to the first centuries after Christ. Illustrations for Virgil's works afforded Roman painters opportunity to treat the subject of the shepherd with his flock. And pagan funerary art took it up also, in its turn, and used it often in its evocations of the ideal sojourn in the afterlife. . . . Christian iconography was certainly led to this subject by the, Scriptures, which compare Jesus to the Good Shepherd and Christians to the flock that he guards. But the existence of the same subject in pagan sepulchral art made it inevitable that these idyllic pastoral images should frequently be transferred to Christian sarcophagi. Both the pagan and the Christian figurations are very similar, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish one from the other. Visually, the vocabulary and the sentiment are the same. . . .

. . . It is not that the art of paganism made a contribution that came to form the Christian iconographic language; rather, all of these images show the normal effects of the employment of terms, or motifs, common to a single visual language, a language whose terms were used by all makers of images—sometimes in a new sense.

. . . But beyond this common ground shared by all the imagery of the age, Christian iconography in late antiquity shows more specific relationships to certain special areas of contemporary iconography, exactly as a particular technical language can furnish itself with special terms drawn by preference from a certain definite source (such as the military or erotic expressions in religious language). It is thus that Christian iconography drew largely on the conventional motifs of the repertory that previously had served the official art of the Roman state and on those of the secondary currents that flowed from this art. Many of the preceding observations refer to Christian images before the Peace of the Church under Constantine. The Peace of the Church opened the door to increased activity in the field of Christian

iconographic creation. But it seems that this flowering did not follow immediately upon the edicts of tolerance (A.D. 313) and that the first great burst of creation in this domain took one specific direction. Since Christian ideas or forms of devotion could now be freely expressed, one might expect Christian iconography to have developed in all possible directions. But this did not occur. . . .

Except for the Christian subjects in the vault of the ambulatory of S. Costanza in Rome, one can set over against all these iconographic monuments, profane and in part frankly pagan (for instance, the images of the Calendar), only the monogram of Christ, the letters chi and rho combined, that Constantine, after a dream, had placed on the shields of his soldiers and on the Imperial standard, the labarum. But let us note, in passing, that this monogram was the equivalent of a symbolic sign, not a representational image. . . . Having broken with idolatry, Constantine could easily have wished to dissociate representational images from the religion of Christ. Moreover, the Chi-Rho monogram adopted by Constantine was particularly appropriate to serve as a symbol of the religion whose destiny he consciously connected with the country of its founder, Christ, and especially with the city of Jerusalem. It is known how much attention Constantine paid to the Palestinian memorials of the earthly career of Jesus. At this time, at Jerusalem and everywhere in the Holy Land, the Jewish tradition of the symbolic sign was a living one and had its application in the art of the synagogue. But, above all, the unique and important contribution of Constantine to Christian iconography—the adoption of the monogram of Christ for the labarum and for the Imperial army—had a practical and military character.

This example of Imperial intervention interests us in two ways. First, we have here a case of Christian iconographic creation whose origins and initiator are known, as well as its place of invention (Rome) and its date (313: the battle of the Milvian bridge). Iconographically, the invention is hardly remarkable; and we can only regret its lack of distinction. Yet here, for once, both written sources and archaeological evidence are exceptionally explicit on the religious significance of the Christian device adopted by Constantine. The device which he put into circulation was a symbol of Christ—I say intentionally Christ and not the

Christian religion—and, since its use was reserved for the army, including the Emperor, head of the Roman army—and, in particular, for the Emperor's helmet—this symbol had manifestly a prophylactic value. The army placed itself under the protection and the guidance of Him whose monogram it bore. . . . One should add that, like earlier iconography, this symbol also in no way attempted to explain or reflect the dogmas or the high principles of Christianity. The salvation assured by Christ was still there (if not represented, at least implied) as the purpose of the display of this symbol, but with this difference—which anticipates the future of Christian art—that the preservation evoked by the symbol was no longer individual but collective. In the Christian view, collectivity means normally the Church of God's people within it; the formula was introduced after the victory of the Church over the Arian emperors and never disappeared. But in 313 Constantine did not see things with the eyes of the Christian clergy: for him, the collectivity to be protected by the Christian symbol that he had adopted was in fact his army, that is to say, the Empire.

It is extremely significant that the initiative for a Christian iconography of universal import, concerned with essential ideas instead of with the personal anxieties of individuals, comes from the government of the Empire, and follows closely upon its conversion. . . .

. . . It was not before about the year 400 that the higher clergy of the Church became conscious of what they could attempt in the domain of iconography if they directed it and fashioned it so as to bring it closer to the dogma and at the same time to render it more edifying. In Constantine's time, the Christian clergy were not prepared for a task of this kind in view of the Christian art they knew—the narrow and utilitarian art which the Christians had practiced in the third century. The government of the Empire, on the other hand, had by tradition all the range of artists' workshops and the indispensable artisans at its disposal, as well as the habit of an official iconography, to interpret for general consumption the facts and moves of the reigning sovereign. It is not astonishing, then, that the great iconographic flowering had its beginnings in the Imperial palace, before control of Christian iconography gradually passed to the Church.

This first phase was important, for it gave an effective direction to Christian iconographic creation; in fact, during the fourth

century and at the beginning of the fifth, at the very end of antiquity, some purely Christian subjects were interpreted with the help of iconographic formulas from palatine art. As we have seen, the earliest Christian iconography frequently employed motifs and formulas in more or less common use in all branches of contemporary art; what happened in the fourth century is similar, but distinct. All the "vocabulary" of a triumphal or Imperial iconographic language was poured into the "dictionary" which served Christian iconography, until then limited and poorly adapted to treat abstract ideas. The future of Christian iconography was profoundly modified, and what was created then has remained fundamental for Christian art. Still today, thanks to this tenacious tradition, most of us lend to the appearance of divine things the features, more or less confused, of forms that go back to the art of the late Empire. Christ sits solemnly on a throne; he makes the sign of benediction; he is surrounded by angels or saints standing on either side; he wears a crown, and crowns the saints, beginning with Mary, who has herself a throne and wears a formal costume with pearls and precious stones, etc. It is Christian art such as it was in the Empire after Constantine that has furnished us all these familiar images. . . .

The mark of Imperial iconography in Christian art is recognizable everywhere and in different ways: appropriation of themes and subjects, borrowings of iconographic details, utilization of more remote models for the creation of analogous images. It is to the theme of the supreme power of God that Imperial art contributed the most, and naturally so, since it was the key theme of all the imagery of the government of the Empire. The official monuments of the late Empire furnished the Christian image-makers with a series of tested models, and they profited from them largely. It is, naturally, through the different applications of the general theme of God's omnipotence—as revealed through Christ —that the influence of Imperial art made itself felt. . . .