Goodenough on the Beginnings of Christianity
Kraabel, A.T.

Published by Brown Judaic Studies

Kraabel, A.T.
Goodenough on the Beginnings of Christianity.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/74910

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2593069
Religious Aspirations

1953

This essay is a schematic, unannotated statement of the religious situation of Late Antiquity; as such, it is valid for more than just the period 284-305, the reign of Diocletian. It is also Goodenough's attempt to demonstrate the relative importance or unimportance of Christianity in that period.

The paper was delivered at a symposium, "The Age of Diocletian," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City on December 14-16, 1951. The other speakers were Casper J. Kraemer, Jr., of New York University, Eberhard F. Bruck of Harvard University, William L. Westermann and Gilbert Hight of Columbia University, and Rhys Carpenter of Bryn Mawr College. (See also Eccles 1985:171-72.)


The religious aspirations of the Age of Diocletian cannot be discussed until we agree upon at least a working understanding of the meaning of the term "religion." Today "religion" is usually associated with a formal organization – a church, a synagogue – or a stated formula of belief, along with certain traditional ways of worship recommended by these organizations and beliefs. Most people who accept these traditional institutions, as well as those who reject them, agree at least in restricting the word "religion" to mean acceptance of the institutions and their requirements; so that those who accept are called religious, and those who reject are supposed to reject religion itself.
Historically, psychologically, anthropologically, such a definition is quite useless, as, I believe, it is for understanding the religious impulses in our own civilization. The greatest religious geniuses in our own tradition, for example, began by rejecting in whole or in part the religious institutions about them. Also, men try to distinguish religion from magic and superstition. More liberal minds go so far as to say that the two are obverse and reverse of the same medal, but they fail to see that they themselves have kept religion as the design on the one face, a design which has no inherent relation to the magical design on the other. If one wants to define magic and superstition as the saying of such specific words, the performance of such definite acts or rites, the wearing of such charms or vestments, as will influence the deity, or the great if formless goddess Fortuna, then one must see that this definition describes the practices, the liturgies, of the great mass of followers of any of the so-called higher religions. I can see in many voodoo rites, charms, and amulets, attempts to control the powers or gods in a way I do not admire, but these are obviously the religion of those who use them. When one of the leading specialists in ancient religion says that to follow rules from "fear of offending gods or demons" is on a "superstitious level," he is of course describing the religious motivation of most that was done in the Age of Diocletian, but he comes perilously near to including any religion in which "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

In contrast to such definitions, it seems to me that man is always trying to get understanding and control of his confusing environment and his equally baffling inner conflicts, and that his various attempts at explanation and control which are not based upon empirical or scientific observation all ultimately fall under faith and religion. Accordingly, in discussing the religious aspirations of the Age of Diocletian, I shall regard as proper matter to be considered any of the ways men took to make themselves secure in the bewildering uncertainties of life and the grim certainty of death. I shall by no means limit the words "religion" and "religious" to the tenets or practices of any one form of cultus.

Both Professor Kraemer and Professor Bruck have spoken of the divine emperor, but they have done so from the point of view of the emperor, and discussed his claim to divinity as a political device. I want, in addition, to emphasize that it was an idiomatic expression of the dreams of the people. In all states of the ancient world the state organization was primarily what we would call a church, in the sense that its purpose was to bring divine order on earth and to offer collective worship. The secular state, which we take so much for granted, is a very modern invention. In the eastern Mediterranean, the
original city-states and principalities had, under and after Alexander, all been absorbed into the great monarchies, in which the head of the state as church was the king. This was partially imposed upon the people by royal decree, but, even more, it was a good political device, because it allowed expression of a deep instinct in the people themselves, an instinctive desire to feel that the forces ruling them, whether just or unjust, were divine. God can do to us what we should never endure from men: He can make us ill, take our money, take the lives of our loved ones— even our little children— and it is all right so long as we feel it is His will. So when the state or ruler is divine, not only is the state stronger, but the people are happier. A democracy or a secular state is strong only in times of prosperity, or, even more, as long as the people feel that they are getting justice. There was little of either prosperity or sense of justice among the people whom the Romans conquered in the East. Hence, from the time of Pompey, the eastern subjects thrust divinity upon their Roman conquerors. They could not otherwise have endured them. The Romans naturally capitalized this idea of the divinity of Rome and the emperors and made it the cement of colonial loyalty. The conception of the divine emperor was, however, so foreign to Roman thinking that for many years it had to be disavowed before the Roman Senate.

All resistance to this idea disappeared by the time of Diocletian. Now, everyone admitted that a divine king, and only a divine king, could give true law; and as law came increasingly to be the product not of the Senate but of imperial decree, its sanction had to be the superhuman quality of the person who thus made as well as administered it. The idea was too basic to be displaced even by the victory of Christianity. True, as long as it was expressed in pagan terminology, which made the king himself a god, the Jews and the Christians refused to accept it, with the result that the strongest emperors turned out to be the severest persecutors. The persecutions were a religious war, that is, like most religious wars, a fight over terminology. In banding together to refuse recognition to the divine state and emperor, the Christians were considered by the rulers to be a great political menace, because they appeared to threaten the very foundations of society. The Christians changed, however, when they themselves became rulers, and in all but terminology continued the state religion without a break. The new Christian attitude began just as soon as a Christian, or one who allowed Christians to use their own terminology, became emperor. The great churchman Eusebius wrote an Address to Constantine which is as much an address to a divine ruler as are the orations of the pagan Dio Chrysostom. The new Christian distinction was that the king, as a man, could not be personally divine;
his office, however, was divine, and he had come into office by divine will and act. So "The powers that be [that is, rulers] are ordained of God" was the new way of saying the old truth. By it the religious function of the state, that is, the king, to produce right law and collective security continued. When the medievalists later argued whether the king got his power directly from God, or indirectly through the Church; when Shakespeare talked of "the divinity that doth hedge a king"; when Louis XIV and the Stuarts talked of divine right; they were all quite as near apotheosizing the king, in practice and attitude if not in terminology, as were the subjects of Diocletian.

I often feel that the greatest weakness of modern democracy is that it has renounced this dramatic and profound religious sanction for the state. When faced with such revivals of it as Hitler offered, or as Stalin now offers, the democracies seem at first uninspired, flaccid. Indeed, the greatest power we have to fear in the Russian state is the religious fanaticism with which it is regarded by the people. The amazing strength of the British, when administering a great empire, or now when struggling for decent survival, can largely be ascribed to what seems to us the quite incredible stabilizing power of their monarchy. An English doctor told me last summer that it was amazing how, when any crisis arises – a crisis not only of illness or childbirth in the Palace, but of trouble of any kind in the nation or empire – the people will assemble quietly, by the hundreds, sometimes by the thousands, before Buckingham Palace, and simply stand and look for hours toward it. They go away comforted and strengthened. The doctrine of divine nature and right, as doctrine, has been completely disavowed; the popular sense on which this doctrine is based still most actively survives. Do not misunderstand me; we in a democracy like America or Switzerland have other sources of strength. But we cannot ignore the appeal and power of political religion – a divine state and a divine ruler. The tremendous religious conflict of Diocletian’s day, the shift to the new Christian terminology, only point up the fact that one of the most important religious drives of the Age of Diocletian expressed itself in this deification of the state as a way to collective security.

There were, however, other aspects of the religious life of the day. In the old days religion had been largely local: a deity or a group of deities were valid within a given region, perhaps at a single spot or shrine, but without power in other regions, where other gods dominated. This religious localism at once expressed the actual insularity of most people of antiquity, and helped to foster it. Civilization in larger units was possible only as these local religious units took their place in a larger religious conception.
Religious Aspirations

The old localism of religion had largely been broken down by the collapse of the city-states and the expansion of the city of Rome. It is frequently pointed out that man turned from the local cults, as of Athena at Athens, to a syncretism, or a mingling, of gods and practices. This peculiar identification of values from various sources was a process especially active in the Age of Diocletian, and to it we shall return. The instinct for localism, however, was never by any means lost to paganism, and it persisted even into the Christian Age, as it still persists. The great mass of local holy places had such importance in late paganism that they were retained in large part by Christianity as the local shrines of saints, the place of some miraculous happening, explained now of course in Christian terms, though often the pagan original can plainly be seen beneath it. One needed a holy object of some sort to make one's field fertile. If later Christians destroyed most of the images of Priapus, or their like, which must have been almost everywhere in antiquity, their places were usually taken by a Christian shrine of some kind in the field. Almost every pagan city had an altar to the Tyche, the Fortuna, of that city, and local sacred grottos, groves, mounds, and mountains were to be found in all countries. These, with a mass of fetishes, were the common objects of religious veneration and security.

The fetishes have by no means been adequately studied. Bonner's magnificent new work, *Amulets*, may break the aloofness with which historians of religion have in general regarded such products of what they call magic and superstition, for Bonner has presented a great collection of them which can at last be studied. They do indeed show rampant syncretism. Symbols and divine figures and names from Syria, Greece, Rome, Egypt – even from Judaism – are mingled with a most confusing freedom. Bonner has demonstrated the particular value of some of these: one device on an amulet was especially good for sciatica, another for intestinal troubles, another for female difficulties, another for problems of the libido. I doubt if any amulet was used exclusively for the goal which the design primarily indicated. All were probably used with a sense that they brought general protection. We do not know the provenience of most of them, but we do know that many were found in graves, and I suspect that most of those now in existence were preserved by having been buried with the persons who had worn them in life. Obviously there is no point in burying a protection from sciatica or diarrhea with a corpse. To be included in graves the amulets presumably would have had some reference to the problems of life after death. They probably had reference to general security also when worn by a living person.
The whole meaning and function of such objects seems still to be inadequately presented. They appear to me to have been a protection from such evils as have been mentioned, or possibly from the evil eye; but also to have served a deeper purpose — what I may perhaps be allowed to call mysticism for the unmystical. The word mysticism may be taken to refer to a religious experience in which the devotee seeks to share in the nature of the divine, to assimilate it to and for himself rather than to pay respect to it at a distance. The amulets obviously often did just that for the wearer, even though he himself would not have been able to say so; and it is in that sense that I call these objects mysticism for the unmystical. One who wears a cross carries with him, as part of himself, some at least of the power of the cross. Similarly, one who wore a Triple Hecate had his powers both of resistance and aggression enhanced by having the Hecate as part of himself.

The worship of the one God of the universe, and the sense that it is this one God who is available to protect and help us personally in life and death, go quite beyond the horizon of the mass of men even today. In Protestant communities, where images, holy relics, sacred medals, the sign of the Cross, and even the idea of the real presence in the Eucharist, have been abolished, one is not prepared for the devotion shown to the specific embodiment of divine power which most people the world over use as their immediate approach to God, and beyond which it is hard to believe many of them ever go. In the world of Diocletian, such objects had practically never been challenged, and almost everyone seems to have had some direct representation, some object of power, on his person or in his house.

Historians of art like to treat the wall decorations still miraculously preserved in Pompeii, or the mosaic floors of Italy or North Africa, as purely decorative, and to discuss them only for their morphological importance, their place in the history of art forms. That they are decorative and have a morphological history is obvious; but that they are a beautiful presentation of religious motifs is just as obvious, and it is hard for me to believe that they lost their religious value as they became beautiful. They were the ancient concomitants of what are now called "holy pictures," and presumably, besides decorating the room, they brought divinity into the house in an intimate, palpable form, and gave protection to those within.

As a Protestant, I may be permitted to remark that the Protestant destruction of all this side of religion may have removed sources of corruption, but it has deeply impoverished religion for most of us. The pagan of Diocletian's Age called the images on his amulets by different names from those given often to the same images of later Christians, but
Religious Aspirations

many of the pagan amulets and figures continued under their new names, and some are in use today.

So far I have not spoken of any of the aspects of religion that most of you had thought would occupy all my attention. Religion in our minds is concerned not only with safety in this life, but with assurance of a future life of happiness. To our way of thinking, the pagan had in early times been oddly unconcerned about what happened to him after death. It is true that at least as early as Plato religion had opened up what I may call the other-worldly dimension, and in Orphism (a vague term) and probably even in the religion of Dionysus, man had found that the chief value of religion was its promise of a happy future in another world. We cannot trace exactly the growth of this idea, but as the Greeks became world citizens under the successors of Alexander, and then as the people of the East, after centuries of calamitous attrition, increasingly despaired of getting the rewards of virtue in this life, more and more their religions took the form of what we now call "mystery religions" – religions having rites by which a man could so be made to share in divine life that he took on the special prerogative of divinity, of immortality. With immortal happiness before him, he could endure the cruelty of this life.

The distinctive idea in all these mystery religions is that while the gods of the other religions were serene and happy, the gods of the mysteries suffered terrible pain. They had been torn to pieces by wild boars, or by enemy gods, or by women; and their consorts, their wives or divine mistresses, had each become the mater dolorosa. Largely by her loving devotion, the dead one had been restored to a life now completely heavenly. The walls or gates of Hades, the land of death, had been stormed, and, in Paul's phrase, "Death was swallowed up in victory."

There is no time for, or point in, trying to review the various local myths of Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Persia, and Greece which were made the basis of mystery religions by having been given this interpretation – by having had a god or goddess with some such adventure turned into a savior with whom one could be so identified that one could hope for immortality. Each myth, each god, produced a special organization, a little priesthood, with its own cult practices. The most important of these practices was what was called the "initiation" of the person adopting the religion, his induction into its secret teachings and passwords, and his taking the place of the god in some sort of pantomime. Just how this was done we are in almost complete ignorance, for each mystery religion was a secret society, and there were none to blab the secrets – at least to us. The mystic philosophy, the sacred myth, could be told, but the rites by which one
got the benefit of the divine suffering were kept entirely secret. Early Christianity took over this pattern, and apparently still into the period of Diocletian the priests cleared the churches and let no one but those in full membership remain to see their central act of appropriating the divine suffering, that is, the consecration of the Eucharist, and its communion. Christians called themselves initiates into the true mystery.

Much as these organizations differed in the god and goddess they worshipped, in the form of myth they told about the divine suffering, each recognized the value of the other, and one who could afford to do so was initiated into several of them. The culmination, at least in some, came when the initiate put on the robe of the god, and so became the god. Phrases in Christian usage, such as "Put on the whole armor of Christ," or "For me to live is Christ," express in terms familiar to us what Apuleius describes as his emotion when he put on the garment of Osiris. For those initiates death had indeed lost its sting.

Many people joined more than one of these organizations, because it was the very spirit of the age to feel that the specific god was never the universal, the true, God, and that all were striving in their various ways to each the same goal. Some were prompted by lower motivation, like a pupil of mine who returned from terrible service in the Pacific Islands with a medal of St. Christopher and a silver horseshoe on his identification bracelet: he said he wanted to be safe both ways. Many of those who joined several of the mysteries did so on this same level of religious life. The more intelligent, however, went into more genuine syncretism, if I may return to that word. Apuleius prayed to Isis by a host of names from a wide variety of sources; Plutarch wrote his treatise on Isis and Osiris to show that the myths behind the mysteries of Dionysus, Osiris, and the Persian God all implied the same basic philosophy, had the same objective and the same object of worship. One of the commonest forms of address to God was to call him the "Many-named," by which they saved themselves the bother of listing all the names from various pantheons.

More important for the history of art, though each mystery kept its original rites and names and myths, there grew up a common language of artistic symbols which all mystic religions adopted and which is still largely the symbolic vocabulary of our religious devotion. The most obvious is the crown of victory which had swallowed up death. The crown could be shown as being offered to a man by the goddess Victory, or, in later Christianity, she might be called an angel; but that same figure with the crown, or the crown by itself, apparently meant, in many pagan religions, the mystic triumph over death. It still has this meaning when we carve it on our tombstones or public
memorials for the war dead, or when we take wreaths to the funerals or graves of our loved ones. The wreath or its equivalent, the palm branch, could also be brought by a cupid, the symbol of God's love, when it was felt that it was the love of God that accomplished the victory. Another symbol, the cup of Dionysus, or his bunch of grapes, could be found on a late Egyptian mummy or among Christian symbols. Men would carve a vine with birds in it, originally the doves of Aphrodite, now become generally the representation of our love which abides in the vine. The shall of Aphrodite was made the background of the portraits of the deceased to show that they were born again in the new life of God, that they were immortal, as we still recognize the symbolism of a shell in a niche for a statue.

The vocabulary of symbols was large: the eagle; Pegasus the winged horse; the ladder; the lion; the Medusa head, now become the benevolent solar head; the fertile but fleeing rabbit; a domestic or harmless animal being torn by wolves or a lion; the rosette, elaborate or in the simple form of the square cross or the swastika; the fish or dolphin; the tree; the peacock; the duck; the rooster; the cornucopia; the mask; the snake; Orpheus taming his animals. These symbols were common to the various religions and could be found in all parts of the Roman Empire on the graves of those who presumably worshipped gods most diverse in names. The symbols became a lingua franca current in all religions, and told everywhere the story of a passionate hope for a future life. Probably in each land or religious circle a different myth was told as to why they were important, but behind the multitudinous explanations their essential value was identical. Most of these symbols survived into Christianity. Some, like the wreath, the dove, the shell, the ladder (magnificent on the front of the Abbey at Bath, England), are still current; some have become archaisms, like the fish; some seem to have lost all their symbolic force and to have become merely decorative or quite meaningless, like the rabbit (though the rabbit still lays the eggs, symbol of life, at Easter - itself the symbol of the conquering of death in the victory of Christ's resurrection).

What I want to convey to you, however, is that this elaborate vocabulary of symbols, if not the product of the late third century, was then in the zenith of its currency and expressed the very genius of the mystery religions. It is no coincidence that as Christianity felt itself to be the true mystery religion it took over this vocabulary for its catacombs, sarcophagi, and churches, to express its hopes of mystic immortality.

Still a higher type of syncretism found expression in the astralism of the late Empire. The sense of helplessness in this life had found from early times one escape in fatalism. The Greek tragedies wrestled with
the problem, and Aeschylus came to his magnificent declaration of faith in a universal God who is just, and on the whole kindly, to men. But the Atomists, the Epicureans, and the Stoics alike reflected the popular feeling that the cards are all stacked when a man is born. Even Plato, although he allows a man freedom to choose his life pattern before he is born, considers him then sealed in this pattern by the Fates, so that in the course of life there is little a man can do about it. Such fatalism is one of man's constant attitudes in face of great danger or of unhappiness. Our soldiers in both World Wars took to it instantly with their legend of the numbers on bullets, while the English said: "If you're for it, you're for it." There is real therapy against terror in such fatalism.

Fatalism flourished everywhere in the days of declining Rome, and was elevated into a sort of religious science when it was identified with the newly-entered Oriental lore of the stars. Astralism was a belief which still survives in its Roman form as astrology. It is a belief that man is a part of the great cosmic cycle; that the stars, especially the planets, are ruling forces (or personalities) which control him, so that being born under a certain configuration of the stars imposes upon one an inevitable character and succession of events. This astral determinism had as its center the sun itself, which could be called by any convenient name, but which as it passed through the stations of the Zodiac seemed to furnish the moving power to everything else. This sun god, whom Greek-speaking people called Helios, was indeed equated with so many local deities that he came to have no specific reference, but was the one God whom all religions recognized as behind their particular saviors. So Helios in the Zodiac appears in almost every religious configuration of the period, and was the last god to die in antiquity; or rather, the last to disappear, for die he of course did not.

Sol invictus, the unconquerable Sun, was the god the Neoplatonists were most willing to accept, the god that Julian the Apostate wished to reestablish. It is most interesting that he had so become the symbol for God as such that in the excavations under St. Peter's, as elsewhere, Christ was found depicted as Helios. Helios was often a personal deity, but he was also often superimposed upon, or was considered as himself imposing, the rigid order of determinism. As the implacable and predetermined will and plan of God for each man, determinism survived in Christianity – predestination we usually call it – the term of Paul which was so central to Augustine and later to Protestants. If Christianity dropped the astral concomitants of that determinism as being too essentially mechanistic or polytheistic, the pagan form of that faith still survives in the unconquerable form of astrology.
One step beyond this led into the Neoplatonism, so popular in the day – or perhaps two steps, for there was an intermediate step in what we call Gnosticism. The origin of Gnosticism is quite obscure, as is, indeed, the very meaning of the word. Some define it as an aberration from Christianity, and hence say that it could not possibly have existed before Christianity. Others say that it was at bottom not Christian at all, that the Christian elements are tangential and superimposed, and that it was essentially pre-Christian in paganism. Still others think it arose in such a Hellenized Jewish milieu as that revealed to us by Philo. Essentially it was built upon a late Platonic notion, the one at the back of Philo's mind, and basic to the thinking of all Neoplatonists; so we may stop to say a few words about Neoplatonism before we go back to Gnosticism.

Neoplatonism was an attempt to put into monistic philosophical terms the otherworldliness of which we have been speaking. It used as its own the Orphic-Platonic notion that the life of man is an entombment of the soul, which has fallen from a better existence into his body, and that the goal of life is to rise above material embroilments into the true reality which is completely immaterial. Above the world of matter, Neoplatonists, especially Plotinus, taught, are three worlds: the first the world of Soul, the second of Mind, and third the One. This One or Monad is the one truly existing reality. It radiates out from itself as the sun emits rays which, as they leave the sun, become cooler, more remote, and are always essentially different from the sun in being derivative rather than themselves original and independent existences. On this analogy the first level of radiation is the universal Mind, the second the universal Soul, and then as the lowest level it forms itself into the material world; or, if dualism is allowed to creep in, the rays were thought to meet the great negation, unformed matter, enter into it, give it form, and produce the material world as we know it. In such a world, the business of man is, by contemplation, abstract thinking, prayer, and a life of strict discipline, to dematerialize himself as far as possible, until he can rise from his bodily interests and live so intensely in immaterial thought that he can ultimately discover even the One, the supreme Monad, and find his true self by losing it in the One, who is universal. Here the Age of Diocletian was reproducing that world-wide phenomenon which is called the Perennial Philosophy, in expounding which Aldous Huxley could quote quite interchangeably from the mystics of India, China, Neoplatonism, the Middle Ages, or the pietists of the Reformation. It is too difficult an approach to religion for any but the few in any age or country. It requires of the devotee a great deal of abstract thinking, and the power of so losing himself in the abstraction that, without seeming
to become concrete in a personal deity, the abstraction itself becomes the all-absorbing, the me-absorbing, reality. It is a conception, however, of everlasting appeal to a certain type of mind, usually people of deepest spiritual potency, and so it has survived in any number of forms in Christian theology and mysticism.

In a paper of so brief compass the matter must be left without further exposition. I can only add that in working out this philosophy afresh the Age of Diocletian made a contribution to all later European life, East and West, beyond any appraisal.

Gnosticism may be defined as Neoplatonism for the minds which cannot take so abstract a path to the Ultimate. Themselves half way between mystery religions on the one hand, and the Neoplatonic hierarchy of abstractions on the other, the Gnostics had a hierarchy by which they could approach the unapproachable. This hierarchy, however, was not one of abstractions but of divine or semi-divine personalities. Instead of thinking that the One at the top had radiated abstractions, the Gnostics saw the procession from God as a series of begotten pairs of personalities, each begetting the pair beneath, until, in one way or another, the lowest one became the creator of the world. Man here, as in Neoplatonism, had to climb back up the ladder to the One, but man did so by knowing the secret passwords, appropriate in turn at each of the stations. These passwords he learned in initiations which probably much resembled the initiations into the mysteries.

The books these people wrote are practically all lost, and we have had to reconstruct our knowledge of the sects from what the Church Fathers said in their excoriations of them - not the most reliable source of information. That is still all we know about them, but, in a few years, study of the whole subject will be completely changed, for just recently eight or ten full volumes of their works have been discovered in Egyptian papyri. They still must be transcribed from the Coptic papyrus manuscripts, translated, and studied, but they will give us such an understanding of the field as was never before possible. All I can say myself is that the papyri are amazingly well preserved and beautifully legible, for I examined one volume of them myself last winter in Cairo. The church pretty well succeeded in destroying Gnosticism, but it had survivals, we may be very sure, in much of the heresy of the Middle Ages and in the cabala of Judaism.

Indeed all Judaism in this period was in one of its most creative moods. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., a few of the scholars of the day, ordinarily then called Pharisees, obtained permission from the Romans to settle in the coast town of Jamnia and found a school. Later they were allowed a Nasi, a chief to whom considerable legal power was conceded by the Romans, though how
Religious Aspirations

much it actually amounted to in practice seems to me quite uncertain. The little group at Jamnia began systematically to codify the laws of Jewish life and greatly to expand them by a system of casuistry essential in the development of all law — that is, raising the question of how a given law would be interpreted in this case or that. Sometimes the cases argued were trivial, and then one had casuistry in its ordinary sense of quibbling; but the rabbis were no more guilty of this than any modern law school, and the method was completely sound. In any case, about twenty-five years before Diocletian began to reign they had produced one of the most remarkable codes in legal literature, the Mishnah; the process of enrichment was in his reign at its very peak, as this code was further elaborated to make the Gemarra, the second chief body of material composing the Talmud. It was to be another century and a half before this second story of the Talmudic structure was completed.

How influential the work of these men was on their own generation is a matter of great doubt. In Babylonia this sort of Judaism became completely dominant, and indeed the standard version of the Talmud was not only finally written in Babylonia, but there for the first time, I believe, became the accepted guide of Jewish life. In this belief, you must understand, I am, as yet, almost alone. The few references to the Nasi and his delegates, the few occasions when a rabbi's decision was of importance for a community in the outposts of scattered Jewry, have been generalized in all Jewish histories into an unquestioned representation that all Jews everywhere in the period of Diocletian, as later in the Middle Ages, were orthodox Jews in the sense that the rabbis were their authoritative guide of life. Since the rabbinic literature was the only literature which later generations of Jews preserved from this period (except for a few scattered mystical works), there seemed no reason to question this conclusion. Rabbinic Judaism was thought to be what G.F. Moore called "normative Judaism," and what Wolfson calls "native Judaism"; and the passion of all Jews who have been what I call "propagating Jews" to conform to Jewish law was supposed to mean a passion to conform to the Talmud, even in those years before the Talmud was written, when it existed largely as the vision and intellectual property of the little group in Jamnia.

Recently a new approach has opened. Though the books written by the Jews in Rome, Alexandria, Carthage, and even in Galilee, were destroyed, archaeology is discovering that the remains of their synagogues and graves have extraordinary things to tell us. For here we find that, far from being an Aramaic-Hebrew-speaking people, they were, in the Age of Diocletian, preponderately or wholly, Greek-speaking in the East (including Palestine), Greek- and Latin-speaking
in the West, and they could not have read a line of the Talmud if they
had had it. They read their Bible, to which they were completely
loyal, in Greek, either in the old Septuagint translation or in the later
one by Aquila, with which the rabbis provided them. But the rabbis
did not provide them with a Greek Mishnah; the services in the
synagogues were conducted in Greek, and in the greater part of the
Jewish Dispersion nothing suggests such rabbinic control as orthodox
Judaism requires.

The Jewish graves and synagogues tell us much more than this. The
Jews were Hellenized not only in language, but, to the complete
bewilderment of those who hold to the standard interpretation of
Jewish history, they adopted and used with complete freedom what I
have described as the symbolic lingua franca of pagan mystic hope.
Automatically, the list of symbols that I read to you as basic in this
lingua franca was a list I had long since made up from a study of Jewish
remains in this period. Victory crowns a naked young man in a Jewish
cemetery in Rome; Helios drives his chariot in the mosaic floor of three
synagogues in Palestine; the peacocks of immortality flank the flowing
chalice in a synagogue near Tunis; the three nymphs attend the baby
Moses in the synagogue at Dura; and, also at Dura, over the holy ark a
mystic vine, with Orpheus and his animals in it, rises up to a great king
on his throne, the symbol of God in the lingua franca and in Jewish
Apocalyptic alike.

Debate on the meaning of this phenomenon can hardly be said to
have begun. I doubt, when the dust settles, that scholars will feel they
can come to any conclusion but that the Jews adopted the lingua franca
because they believed Judaism also was essentially a mystery in the
sense that it too promised man victory over death through its law, and
especially through its great and God-given law-giver, Moses. This
Judaism was probably much like cabala, in that, among other
things, although cabalists have almost always obeyed the law
in its essentials, the deeper significance of Judaism for cabalists
was its revelation of a series of descending stages or worlds in the
process of creation, with our material world at the bottom; and that
the duty of man is to discover, and to come increasingly to live in,
the higher worlds rather than this one. So in this period were being
created the two great types standard in all later Judaism, the rabbinical
Judaism of the Talmud and the mystical Judaism later called cabala.

It has always been supposed that the Jewish background of
Christianity was rabbinic Judaism. But since Christianity used the
Septuagint as its Bible, wrote all its earliest documents in Greek for
pagans or Greek-speaking Jews, and suddenly began its art with that
part of the lingua franca which Judaism had adopted, intimately
associated with figures from the Old Testament as Jews presented them, it is much more profitable to look for the immediate Jewish background of Christianity in this Hellenized Judaism than in rabbinism.

Some of you had probably expected, from my title, that I would speak mostly about the extraordinary new religion which in the Age of Diocletian arose from the amphitheaters where it was being tortured, to be the dominant, I fear often the torturing, faith of the Empire. Instead of retelling that story, which I suspect is fairly well known to all of you, I shall close with a brief consideration of the question why, of all these forms of religion that I have been discussing, Christianity should have been the victor, indeed, except for Judaism, the sole survivor.

First, I remind you that Christianity is to be understood only if we think of it as the omnium-gatherum of all the different religious values, including those of Judaism, which we have been discussing. There were new Christian amulets, but the favorite ones seem to have been such slight alterations of pagan-Jewish amulets as were made when the Christians took the old cavalier-god killing with his spear the representative of evil, just put a cross line on the spear, and called the figure by one of several names for saints. The divine state was still the divine state, though people were to argue for a millennium and a half how the king got his divine powers. The old idols were destroyed, though some of them, like the figure of Isis holding Osiris, could still be used by cutting off the old name and writing "Mary" or "Mother of God" in its place. The religious values of the local deities were carried on in the local saints, so that every church was dedicated not only to God, but to a particular saint. The pagan ritual of sacrifice of animals disappeared entirely, but the Lamb that was slain was daily available in the sacrifice of the Mass, and in Communion.

The Church Fathers took the best of Neoplatonism and constructed out of it an extraordinary system of theology. There were points of difference, such as that the final mystical achievement for the Neoplatonists was the absorption of the person in the One, while the beatific vision still kept the integrity of the Blessed individual. All of this continuity seems to me epitomized in the fact that the symbolic lingua franca, first of pagan religions, then of Judaism, was – and to a large extent still is – also the symbolic language of Christian devotion.

To become the exclusive religion of the Empire, Christianity had, however, to do more than reaffirm the values of the religions it displaced. As to what this "more" was, we shall never agree. To the orthodox Christian – Catholic or Protestant – the great addition was that while the other religions taught myth, Christianity, in teaching
the incarnation, was teaching historical fact and metaphysical truth. No one is in position to dispute the reality of the incarnation; if we accept it, however, we can do so only on faith. Still we can all agree that the Christians were deeply convinced that the incarnation was indeed an historical fact, and they see in that conviction a power whose absence was the greatest lack in even such lofty pagan formulations as those of Porphyry and Julian.

With the conviction went a church organization which not only kept men in line, but was always at hand to administer the consolations of the sacraments and to offer a most gratifying liturgical cultus. Soon to express itself in the glories of Romanesque and Byzantine architecture, Christianity did indeed take unto itself – and go beyond – all else that was the religious genius of the Age of Diocletian. I have given it relatively little space because I wanted you to see the age as a whole for what it was, that is, one of the greatest creative periods in religious history.