Melchisedech and the Emperor: Icons of Subversion and Orthodoxy

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MELCHISEDECH AND THE EMPEROR: ICONS OF SUBVERSION AND ORTHODOXY

Presidential Address 1972

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I MUST start on a note of apology. In a well-intentioned attempt to design a lecture which would interest a wide variety of people I have landed myself with a topic which is far too large for its allotted space. You must forgive me if, in the interests of compression, I leave a large number of loose ends unexplained.

Consider first of all the diagram shown in fig. 1. This schema represents a cosmological system in which impotent Man on Earth is polarised against omnipotent God in Heaven. Religion is concerned with mediation between the two spheres such that a channel is provided through which divine potency from Heaven is brought to bear upon the affairs of impotent Man on Earth.

Ethnography reveals a variety of possible mediating systems of this general type but two particular patterns are especially frequent. The first is that of *sacrifice*. The mediator is a human being, the priest of the sacrifice, who acts on behalf of a lay congregation. The sacrificial rite is viewed as an 'offering' to the Deity and the priest, who stands in a superior position *vis-à-vis* his congregation, is in a suppliant status *vis-à-vis* the Deity.

In my title I refer to this hierarchical model as 'an icon of orthodoxy'. Later in the lecture I shall show how it is given visual expression in certain Ravenna mosaics made in the time of the Emperor Justinian with the express purpose of asserting the emperor's identification with orthodox catholic theology.

In the second pattern it is God who takes the initiative by offering grace to the faithful. The individual devotee is directly inspired. The charisma is a direct gift from God which is in no way dependent upon the ritual efficacy of a mediating human priest. This non-hierarchical model is what I describe as 'an icon of subversion'. In empirical circumstances it is closely associated with millenarian belief and heretical radicalism. This model also finds expression in early Christian art.

The next topic that I would have you consider is the general theory of millenarian cults as discussed in the recent writings of historians and social anthropologists (e.g. Cohn 1957; 1962; Worsley 1957; Hobsbawn 1959; Thrupp 1962). The authors concerned have repeatedly observed that in practically every well-documented case the basic chiliastic doctrine has its roots in ideas that were current among Judaeo-Christians of the first century A.D. The cargo cults of Melanesia, the Ghost Dance of the North American Indians, and the Taiping rebels of nineteenth-century China were all equally, in their devious fashion, derivations from the Biblical Book of Revelations. Yet I know of no study which has attempted to apply modern millenarian theory to the known facts of early Christianity. One of my objectives this evening is to suggest that there are some problems in this area which deserve much closer attention. One of these problems is the age-old topic of the Arian heresy.

A standard manual (Kelly 1958:232) of early Christian doctrine roundly declares that:

> we have little or no first hand evidence of the reasons animating the fathers of Nicaea in their repudiation of Arianism.

I shall propose a piece of second-hand sociological evidence on this topic which seems to have been largely neglected.

My starting point, which is based on much wider reading than some of you may care to give me credit for, is the following. The origin of Christianity lay in a wide-ranging cultural situation rather than in any single event. From as early as the second century B.C., the jumble of Egyptian, Hellenistic, Jewish and Persian ideologies that were current in the eastern Mediterranean area had provided the eschatology for a whole series of millenarian cults that were so closely related to one another that to a contemporary outsider they appeared indistinguishable. Present day Christian commentators describe Gnosticism as 'the product of syncretism which drew upon Jewish pagan and oriental sources of inspiration'.[1] I myself consider that the same is true of Christianity itself. There was not just one primitive Christian church; there were many.

But if first-century Christianity consisted of a collectivity of overlapping millenarian sects rather than a unitary church, then, from a comparative point of view, the history of the Puritan sects in seventeenth-century England becomes directly relevant. And with Max Weber in the background, *that* kind of cross-reference must immediately lead any social anthropologist to ask: In what sense was early Christian doctrine intermeshed with its social context?

It is astonishing to find how little attention has been paid to this rather obvious problem. Although

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lay congregation ─────────▶ sacrificial
                             priest
                                    ╲
                                     ╲
THIS WORLD                            ╲
IMPOTENT MAN        MEDIATOR           ▶  OTHER WORLD
                                    ╱    OMNIPOTENT GOD
                                  ╱
directly inspired ◀──────  demi-god  ◀╱
     'Elect'               'holy spirit'
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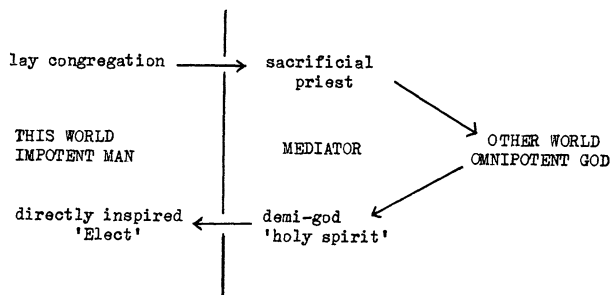
FIGURE 1. Sacrifice and inspiration: alternative cosmological
schema.

the experts give full prominence to the way in which political intrigue influenced the outcome of individual Church Synods and Councils they have shown little interest in the social background of belief as such.

As a result, the seemingly endless debate about the nature of the Trinity and the limits of Christ's humanity continues to be treated as if it were part of an ongoing seminar continued over centuries within the closed doors of a University Faculty of Theology. Even the most recent textbooks still manage to convey the impression that the early Christian Church was a scholastic madhouse wholly preoccupied with subtleties of verbal definition.

The counter-argument which I am about to present to you, however defective it may be from the point of view of scholarship, at least makes sociological sense. At long last I begin to feel that I understand what the Arian controversy was all about.

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During my professional life-time, social anthropologists have discussed the sociology of religion in two very different ways.

At the outset, when functionalism of the Malinowskian sort was in its heyday, it was taken for granted that religion, like everything else, was a conservative force contributing to the internal balance of the self-perpetuating social order. Even as late as 1959, Raymond Firth (1964:246) declared that 'religion helps to maintain, to support the social values upon which the continuance of the society depends' though he went on to admit that 'religion does not always perform these stated social functions'. Historians of radical inclination were particularly staunch in their defence of this position. In line with Marx's dictum that 'Religion is the opiate of the people' they took it to be self-evident that organised religion is not only conservative but a part of the apparatus of oppression manipulated by the ruling class.[2]

But during the last few years the change of emphasis has been quite dramatic. Triggered off, it would seem, by the historical sophistication of Norman Cohn's wide-ranging studies of millenarianism in medieval Europe and Peter Worsley's oversimplified Marxist interpretation of Melanesian Cargo Cults (Cohn 1957; 1962; Worsley 1957), left-wing English historians have really gone to town on the protestant cults of the early seventeenth century. As a result, the religion of the Levellers, the Diggers, the Seekers, the Ranters, the Fifth Monarchy Men, the Quakers, the Muggletonians and the rest of Christopher Hill's merry crew is now displayed to us as a force of revolutionary liberation (Hill 1972).

As you will appreciate, these two models of the function of religious belief correspond to my twin icons of orthodoxy and subversion but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive or contradictory. At different times, in different places, Emperor and Anarchist alike may find it convenient to appeal to Holy Writ.

But the shift of register from innovation to conservatism and back to innovation again is a complex process which calls for detailed analysis.

If there are genuine regularities about these social oscillations, the decipherment of such 'process' certainly falls within the province of social anthropology, but, since the data that must be called in evidence need to be historical and spread over a considerable period of years, the social anthropologist, on his own account, is ill-equipped to do anything about it. In order to formulate a hypothesis of dialectical development he must borrow materials from other people. That is the justification for my present procedure.

So far as the analysis of millenarianism in seventeenth-century England is concerned the historians are now fully engaged. The social anthropologists have nothing more to do except stand on the side-lines and profit from the ensuing combat. In what has been published so far, two points seem particularly relevant to my problem.

First, it is evident that even in this highly literate seventeenth-century society, myth could readily dominate over historical fact. For example, long before 1659 it was being widely noised abroad, and seemingly believed by 'sober and eminent persons', that it was the Jesuits who had executed the King in 1649 (Lamont 1972:79)! In the light of my fieldwork experience as a social anthropologist this does not really surprise me, but it must be disconcerting for theologians who would like to persuade themselves that the Synoptic gospels are a repository of historical truth. The plain implication of the English material is that when a spirit of heresy-hunting is around, even the most 'sensible' people are liable to believe almost anything. Any connexion between historical fact and belief becomes purely accidental.

The second point of significance is the way that the seventeenth-century sects were mixed up, not only over issues of doctrine, but in their personnel. In the course of a few years a single individual might move right across the doctrinal and political spectrum. As Lamont puts it (1972:88): 'The young Milton looked for the establishment of a New Jerusalem in five

weeks; the mature Milton extolled the patience of Job'.

We find the same pattern among the Christian Fathers of the second century. There was no generally accepted orthodoxy; tolerance and heresy-hunting went hand in hand. 'I and many others' says Justin Martyr (1861: ch. 79) 'believe that the millennium will come to pass . . . but there are at the same time many of a pure and devout Christian mind who are not of the same opinion; however, as for those who are called Christians, but are in reality godless and impious heretics, I have already proved that they teach all that is blasphemous, and atheistical and foolish'.

Such parallels are surely significant. Christianity in its earliest phase was a millenarian movement in the literal sense of that term. If some things are true about millenarian movements as a class they should be true of primitive Christianity.

But *what* is true about millenarian movements as a class? Those who are familiar with the very extensive literature on this topic (cf. Thrupp 1962; Lanternari 1963) will know how difficult it is to give a clear-cut answer. All that I would want to argue is that the following characteristics, which are found in early Christianity, appear also in a great number of other millenarian cults both ancient and modern.

First, the millenarian tradition is not simply a theory about the approach of the Last Judgement; it is a theory about temporal recapitulation. The sacred record of what has happened in the past can be turned back to front and used as a sacred prediction of what is going to happen in the future.

Secondly, anxious concern with the end of time tends to reach a maximum in periods of exceptional political uncertainty. At such times the devout Sectarian's anxiety to be found among the Elect on the Day of Judgement goes along with an obsessional concern with the pursuit of heretics.

Thirdly, it is a necessary precondition for the formation of a *new* millenarian movement that the secular context from which it emerges should *already* contain, in embryo, a self-identifiable community which can readily be led to perceive itself as alienated from the interests of the paramount political power. There are many possible sources for this initial alienation—colonial conquest, the rise of a new economic class, survival from some natural disaster, persecution of an ethnic minority—but the end result is the same. Millenarianism is a creed for those who *feel* themselves to be deprived; it arises as a movement of protest against rulers who claim to exercise authority by divine right rather than as representatives of the General Will.

The adherents of a new cult are not necessarily impoverished; some may be relatively wealthy. Indeed the missionary-apostles of the movement must always be persons of education and sophistication. But those who join a *new* cult always feel themselves to be *politically* underprivileged; in a political sense, they come from the bottom of the heap.[3] They are people who are excluded from all positions of real authority by the conventions of the existing system.

In this initial phase, the political theory of millenarian sects is always markedly egalitarian, with either communist or anarchist leanings. It is also markedly impractical. But although millenarian prophets are inclined to attack the existing social system with words rather than deeds, they almost invariably come to be regarded as a threat to the legitimate forces of law and order. The persecution and martyrdom which is a standard part of the syndrome is an automatic consequence of this situation.

However, as time goes on, individual members of the persecuted anarchist minority begin to acquire social and political respectability. At this stage millenarian doctrines fade into the background. In the long run the heirs to the preachers of heresy are likely to end up as the mouthpieces of an established orthodoxy upon which the political regime leans for support.

That formula is extremely general but there are plenty of concrete examples. The evolution of English Quakerism since 1651 provides a copy-book example.

In its beginnings, the Quaker movement was on the extreme left. Its members were closely associated with the recklessly anarchist Ranters. Millenarianism was carried so far that in 1656 James Nayler claimed to be Christ incarnate and rode into Bristol mounted on an ass to symbolise His Second Coming. Both he and George Fox, the other founding Quaker preacher, were repeatedly imprisoned and the whole sect suffered vigorous political persecution and exclusion from office for over thirty years. Yet by 1800 the leading Quaker families were already wealthy and influential and have subsequently acquired an outstanding reputation for political good sense and social responsibility.

This overall process is what Max Weber described as 'the routinisation of charisma' (1947:334 sq.).

The comparable evidence for the early Christian case is patchy but significant. The document known as the *Didache*, the relevant portions of which belong to the latter part of the first century (see Richardson 1953:161–82), presupposes a world into which James Nayler and George Fox would have fitted perfectly. The Church had no central organisation, no temples, no altars. The local sectarian communities were visited by itinerant 'God inspired'[4] prophets, but they also employed their own 'bishop' who was an ordained minister. The latter had assistants of either sex, known as 'deacons'. There was no large-scale hierarchy of church officials though as early as the end of the first century the Bishop of Rome was already claiming that he was uniquely qualified to decide issues of doctrine because of his direct apostolic succession from Peter and Paul (Clement: chs. 42–4, in Richardson 1953).

One common heritage of the rival Christian sects was the belief that they were the new Israelites, the new Chosen People. The Jewish scriptures were inter-

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preted as prefigurations of the Christian revelation. Christ is a second Adam; Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea pursued by the armies of Pharaoh is separating the Elect from the Damned. Incidentally a much later, fourth-century, pictorial representation of this scene shows the Elect austerely dressed as respectable Roman citizens while the Damned are a military rabble wearing Phrygian (i.e. Mithraic) hats![5]

Early second-century texts indicate that the faithful mostly imagined that they were living close to the end of time. A physical millennium on this earth was close at hand. Jerusalem was to be rebuilt and inhabited for 1000 years by the resurrected Elect (Dodgson 1854:123).

It is notable that in the *Didache* (chs. 9, 10, 14:2; Clement 44:4, in Richardson 1953) the sacrament of the Eucharist is viewed primarily as a common sacred meal through which the communicants assimilate to themselves the physical body of Christ as mediator. Although the rite is described as a sacrifice (*thusia*), the doctrine of universal redemption is missing. Jesus is a secondary being described as the servant (? child) of God. The pattern is that of the lower part of my fig. 1 rather than that of the top.

In subsequent centuries there was a dialectical development corresponding to the success or failure of particular prelates in Rome or Constantinople or Alexandria or Antioch to assert paramountcy over ecclesiastical sees of varying scale. Wherever ecclesiastical hierarchy became elaborated millenarian doctrine fell into disfavour; *vice versa*, wherever a local schismatic church reasserted its independence millenarian belief once again became prominent.[6]

Such changes depended upon changes in interpretation rather than alteration of the scriptures. Thus Irenaeus (second century) declares explicitly that there is nothing allegorical about the imminent resurrection of the dead (cf. Dodgson 1854: 120 sqq.), but by A.D. 230 Origen was already representing the New Jerusalem as belonging to the order of Platonic ideas rather than of earthly facts (cf. Kelly 1958: 472–3). By the fifth century Christianity had become the official State religion, so implicitly revolutionary doctrines were quite out of place. St Augustine, who died in A.D. 430, spent the last years of his life teaming up with the political authorities in their forcible suppression of the separatist and millenarian adherents of the Donatist heresy in north Africa. Although, in his youth, Augustine had himself inclined towards millenarian belief he now declared that the Millennium was simply a symbol standing for the entire Christian era.[7]

Throughout these centuries of doctrinal oscillation and evolution, the formulae of belief propounded by those who anticipated an imminent physical millennium here on earth were invariably 'Arian in style'.

I must try to explain what I mean by that anachronistic statement.

Properly speaking, the particular doctrinal controversy known to history as the Arian heresy originated in A.D. 318 in Alexandria in a local quarrel between the Bishop and his Presbyter and was settled once and for all by the Council of Nicaea seven years later. But the issues that lay in that background of the quarrel had already been a source of worry for generations and several centuries were to elapse before the Nicene ruling became completely accepted by the whole Christian Church. Indeed, in diverse forms, the controversy has persisted right down to the present day. The radically millenarian Jehovah's Witnesses are avowed followers of Arius.

Modern orthodoxy in all the established Churches, both in the East and in the West, accepts the Nicene ruling and is thus both dyophysite and anti-Arian, but most of those who are now considered to be representative early Christian Fathers of the second and third centuries originally expressed themselves in Arian style.

This is an essential point in my argument. The early Christian sects were both millenarian and Arian in disposition and the two characteristics are closely associated. The denunciation of Arianism in A.D. 325 was part and parcel of the decay of millenarian doctrine which followed logically from the political emancipation of the Church at large.

The precise point at issue is not easily expounded. The rival theorists were attempting to derive diametrically opposite implications from the same passages of Holy Writ and they hurled abuse at one another very much in the contemporary style of high-ranking officials of Moscow and Peking. In the literature of the fourth century the label 'Arian' is often no more illuminating than is Marxist-Leninist-Bourgeois-Deviationist, but if you go back to the second century and follow the argument through to the sixth you will find that there is an evolution. Although the same themes constantly recur, there is a gradual shift of emphasis: the authority of ordained priests replaces the revelation of inspired prophets; the Crucifixion supplants the Incarnation as the doctrinal crux.

In the earliest texts it is the *birth* of the Christ-Logos as second Adam which brings enlightenment to the Elect and which marks the beginning of New Time; only later does the emphasis come to fall on the Crucifixion as the redemptive sacrifice for all mankind. In earlier versions the Millennium is to *precede* the Last Judgement, implying that the Elect are already known; later the sequence is reversed, the Millennium is a reward for the virtuous in the last days which are still far off.[8]

All such changes imply a shift away from my 'icon of subversion' towards my 'icon of orthodoxy', but mostly they lie in the background. In a more formal sense the main worry was over the nature of Deity and the humanity of Christ. Are the three persons of the Trinity eternal, co-existent, beings which are one with the First Cause, or is Deity a hierarchy of differentiated entities, parts of which are subordinate to the whole? Post-Nicene orthodoxy takes the former

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PLATE 1. Melchisedech presents bread and wine to Abraham. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome.
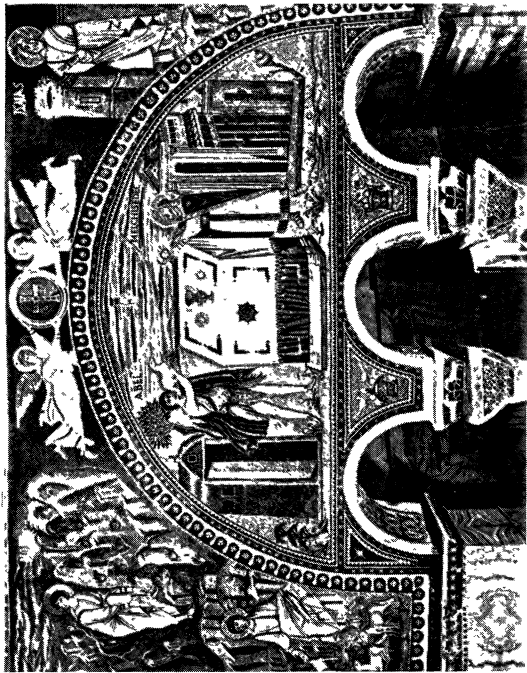
PLATE 3. S. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna.
See p. 11, col. 2.

PLATE 2. S. Vitale, Ravenna. Matching panel to Plate 8.
See p. 11, col. 1, bottom.

PLATE 4. Logos figure from Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (detail from Plate 1).

PLATE 6. Theodora and court. Note the halo. S. Vitale, Ravenna.

PLATE 8. S. Vitale, Ravenna. Matching panel to Plate 2.
See p. 11, col. 1, bottom.

PLATE 5. Justinian and courtiers. Note the halo. S. Vitale, Ravenna.

PLATE 7. Christ as World Emperor. S. Vitale, Ravenna, main apse.

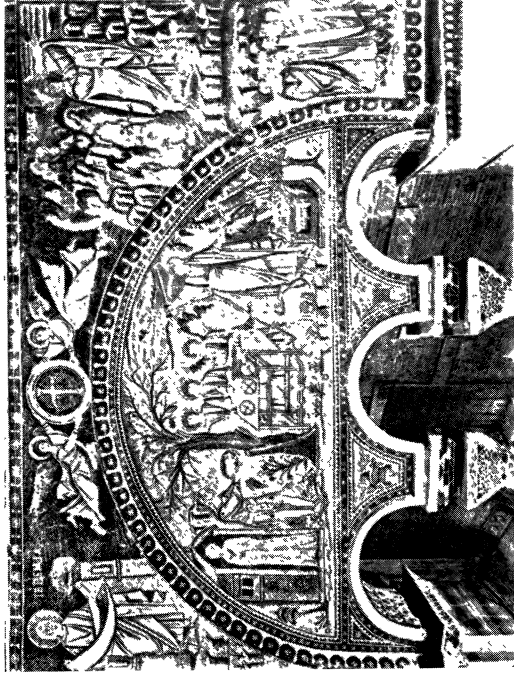PLATE 9. Main apse, S. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna. See p. 12, col. 2.

view. The Trinity is consubstantial, co-eternal. Likewise, in orthodox doctrine, the incarnate Jesus Christ was *both* 'fully a human being with a human soul' *and* eternally, from the beginning, 'fully one with the First Cause of the Creation'. Christ was thus one Person in two Natures. This doctrine has the direct implication that the Incarnation was a unique, once-for-all, non-rational, historical event which can never be repeated.

But the earlier Christians, as well as later schismatic opinion, diverged from this view in two directions. At one extreme it was held that Christ was always God and his human form only an appearance; at the other, the human Christ and the divine Logos, though housed in one fleshy body, were separate rather than fused. In either case, God, as such, has only one nature.

Monophysite doctrines of this latter kind have two important consequences. First they imply that there was a time when the incarnate Christ was not, and hence that He is in some sense, a specially created Being, secondary to the First Cause. But secondly they imply that any inspired human prophet who feels himself to be possessed by the Holy Spirit is really no different, in kind, from Christ himself. Hence the Incarnation ceases to be a unique historical event in the past; it becomes a perpetually repeatable event belonging to the present.

The particular heresy for which Arius was condemned in A.D. 325 was the doctrine that the Christ-Logos was a created being, which carried the implication that the Trinity is a hierarchy of separate persons of different degrees of efficacy. I am claiming that there is a logical 'fit' between the rejection of this doctrine and the acceptance of Imperialism and Episcopal hierarchy. Let me elaborate the kind of correlation I have in mind.

In any established political hierarchy the legitimacy of any individual office-holder's actions derives from the delegated authority of some other office holder higher up the system. At the top of the pyramid the legitimacy of the actions of the Emperor-Pope can derive from one source only, the direct authority of God himself.

Wherever religion serves to support the established order in this way it must recognise a hierarchy of human beings and must approve of the order of time as it is now. The social world, as it is now and ever shall be, is ruled by men whose authority derives from a unique, remote, self-legitimising, eternal source, God. The common man can have no direct access to this ultimate power; his only approach is through the hierarchy of established *human* officers. There can be no short cuts. Any suggestion that the common man should expect further direct intervention by God in the ordering of society amounts to sedition, since it calls in question the legitimacy of the established order. It follows that all theories about the commencement of 'new time', or the imminent appearance of divine beings in human form, are politically subversive.

Catholic orthodoxy is consistent with this pattern. The Redemption of Mankind was a once-for-all event which occurred in the historical past and need not occur again. God and Jesus are one person in two natures, the completely Divine and the completely Human. There is no hierarchy of greater and lesser deities. There is one deity remote and unapproachable except through the mediation of a consecrated human priest, whose legitimacy of status was established from the beginning through the Apostolic succession.

Where religion serves subversive ends the opposite pattern prevails. The present state of affairs is evil, but, with the triumph of the revolution, new time will commence. Since rebellion is clearly illegitimate in terms of the *existing* secular hierarchy, it must be made legitimate by taking short cuts to the ultimate divine source of power. It follows that the radical sectarian's God must be directly approachable by each individual whether he be a priest or not. Redemption is not something that has been granted to all mankind subject only to the obedience of the individual; it is a privilege of the Elect, the Saints who are individually in direct communication with God.

In the Christian version of this doctrine God the Son—the Christ-Logos—becomes a subordinate function of the Father but closer and more approachable. In effect, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit become demi-gods; but, equally, the spiritual leaders of men are themselves almost demi-gods since they are directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. Indeed there have been numerous radical egalitarian sects in which the postulated historical Jesus was rated as a kind of super-prophet rather than a God and the whole congregation qualified individually for Sainthood. My first slide (fig. 2) illustrates this model schema. The left-hand column is intended to exemplify the structure of sixth-century dyophysite orthodoxy in the reign of Justinian. The right-hand column is that of Arian millenarian heresy of the kind that was generally fashionable prior to A.D. 325. You will notice that it is the same diagram as that shown in fig. 1 but tilted
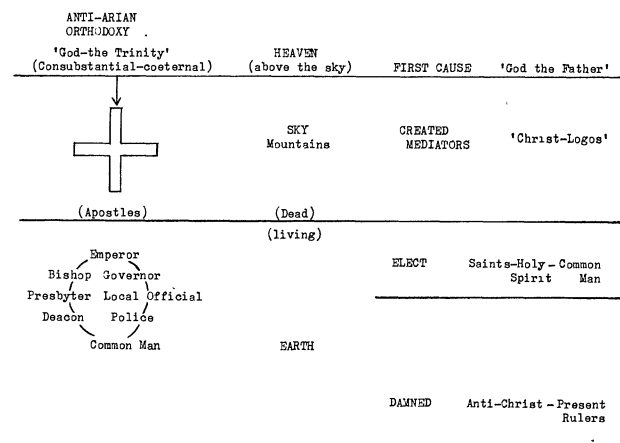

FIGURE 2. Deity–Man and hierarchy: alternative cosmological schema.

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on one side: impotent man below, omnipotent God above, channel of mediation in between. In the left-hand column the channel of mediation is the sacrificial cross; on the right it is the demi-god Christ-Logos.

Now in structuralist theory the geometry of cosmological ideas is their most fundamental characteristic; so my argument becomes a testable hypothesis. If my diagram is a 'correct' structural representation of the difference between orthodoxy and Arianism then it should show up in the iconographic conventions of early Christianity. Let us see where we can get to with that one!

Not perhaps very far. In order to demonstrate such a thesis I should need to have *certain* evidence about the iconographic conventions of second-century Christianity. I do not have that evidence. Early Christian art was probably very limited in quantity. Many of the Fathers, like their seventeenth-century Puritan successors, considered that all 'images were demonic symbols of superstition' (Chadwick 1967: 277 sqq.). It is true that right from the start Christianity had its wealthy patrons who may have decorated their private houses with Christian themes, but direct evidence of this has not survived. So long as Christianity remained an illegal cult there can have been no public churches. We know that fourth-century churches existed in fair number and that they were lavishly decorated, but very little of this art now survives (Beckwith 1970: 10–11). It follows that all theories about the iconographic conventions of very early Christianity are highly speculative. However it may plausibly be argued that where a datable early fifth-century mosaic contains an apparently 'established' convention, or repeats some theme of which there is an isolated instance in an earlier tomb painting from the catacombs, it is likely that the fifth-century picture derives from an original belonging to the fourth century or earlier.

That is an extremely tight summary of a very complex argument but it must suffice. This is where Melchisedech comes into my story.

Melchisedech is a figure of considerable importance in the non-canonical literature of both sectarian Judaism and early Christianity. In the Qumran literature he is equated with the Archangel Michael as Judge of the Last Days (Van der Woude 1965) and is prominent in various apocalyptic Christian tracts such as *The Book of Adam and Eve* and the *Slavonic Book of Enoch* which have their ultimate origin in pre-Christian originals of the first century A.D. Although the total 'apocryphal mythology' of Melchisedech is considerable; relatively little attention seems to have been paid to him after the sixth century, though in modern times he has a place in Mormon doctrine. In the early literature millenarianism and Melchisedech seem to be closely associated. It would seem that he was only infrequently represented in early Church art and only three major pictorial representations have survived from antiquity. They are shown together on this murky slide [see Plates 1, 2, 3].

All three illustrations refer to the same passage in *Genesis* XIV, which reads as follows:

> And Melchisedech king of Salem brought forth bread and wine and he was priest of the most high God. And he blessed him and said 'Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand'. And Abram gave him tithes of all.

In accordance with the principle of the recapitulation of time the early Christian Fathers treated this incident as a prefiguration of the Eucharist.

It is clear that the three pictures exemplify two quite different iconographic conventions. In the right-hand picture [Plate 1] Melchisedech presents bread and wine to Abraham as in the Genesis quotation. The Christ-Logos floats overhead in human form pointing at Melchisedech. There is no altar or other ritual paraphernalia.

In the other two pictures we only know that we are dealing with Melchisedech because he is so named. God is off-stage and points at the scene with a three-fingered hand projecting through the sky. Melchisedech is explicitly the priest at the Eucharist, engaged in a ritual involving an altar.

The two pictures containing the Hand of God and the Altar can be given a precise context. They come from Ravenna in the time of Justinian. The picture with the floating Christ-Logos is more uncertain. It is one of the mosaic panels in the nave of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. There are now twenty-five such panels though formerly there were more. They show scenes from the life of Abraham on one side and from the lives of Moses and Joshua on the other. All the panels have been mutilated and brutally restored at various times. For the past seventy years there has been an impassioned and immensely learned debate about the dating and provenance of these panels which still continues. The present consensus of learned opinion seems to be that the mosaics are of the same date as the main fabric of the church itself which can be dated fairly precisely to around A.D. 432. Earlier experts had maintained that the pictures were a hang-over from a much earlier building. However, there appears to be agreement that where these panels reflect a peculiar convention of their own this must be a survival from an earlier period. The floating Christ Logos figure is one such peculiarity [see Plate 4]. It appears in five different places in the twenty-five surviving panels whereas the Hand of God convention, which is elsewhere quite common, appears only once.[9]

There seems to be substantial agreement that, whatever may be the date of the panels themselves, the floating Christ-Logos refers back to the kind of argument that was presented by Justin Martyr in the second century where he argues at great length that the 'Creator of all things Who always remains above the heavens and who has never been seen by any man' is to be distinguished from the God who appeared to

Abraham, Moses and Joshua who was 'another God and Lord *under* the Creator of all things, in that He bears messages to men whatever the Creator, above whom there is no other God, wills to be borne to them' (Justin: Dialogue with Trypho 56).

By the early fifth century this hierarchical Arian view of the mediating deity was already thoroughly heretical; the orthodox view would have been that of St Augustine ((a) ch. 10:68): 'In so far as Christ is man, he is mediator but not in so far as He is Word, for as such he is co-equal with God'. But it would seem that the artists of Santa Maria Maggiore had not managed to keep up to date with the latest shifts in theology.

The two Ravenna pictures come from the churches of San Vitale and San Apollinare in Classe. Both churches are of the same date; they were dedicated in 548 and 549 respectively. Their decorations commemorated the reassertion of full Byzantine authority over Italy after half a century during which the Ostrogothic kingdom founded by Theodoric had been more or less independent. The Ostrogoths were Christians of mildly Arian persuasion and Ravenna was their capital. In 543 Justinian had taken a personal lead in declaring that the teaching of Origen in the third century had been heretical and a precursor of Arianism. It was thus appropriate that the new churches, designed to do honour to Justinian, should be filled with explicit anti-Arian propaganda. The iconography in question has in fact been interpreted in this sense (Quitt 1903).

The original decorations of San Vitale are fairly complete. They include portraits of the Emperor Justinian and the Empress Theodora and their courts [Plates 5 and 6]. Notice that Justinian and Theodora are distinguished by halos. They are living saints, near deities. Over the vault of the apse is a beardless Christ in the role of World Emperor [Plate 7]. Here again the implication is that the Emperor is a mediator in a special class by himself.

Apart from these glorifications of the Emperor himself and of the divine sanction for his imperial role the two principal panels are representations of sacrifice. In my language they are icons of orthodoxy [Plates 8 and 2].

Plate 8 on the left shows Abraham offering hospitality to the three Angels, (representing the Trinity), who have come to announce the impending pregnancy of Sarah, extreme left. On the right Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac, the son born of that pregnancy. The three-fingered hand of God reaches through the heavens to deter him. Far right Moses receives the commandments direct from the hand of God while inferior commoner Israelites chatter below.

The corresponding panel on the other side of the aisle is the one you have already seen in Plate 2. Abel emerges from a hut and offers a lamb; Melchisedech with a halo emerges from his kingly palace and offers bread and wine from an altar. God is again represented by a hand piercing the sky. On the left is another representation of Moses, this time communicating direct with the deity on high through the burning bush. The commoner Israelites have here been reduced to the status of sheep.

Abel is of course another 'prefiguration'. He is the son of Adam who *first* offers a lamb as sacrifice and is *then* himself slain; he 'prefigures' the Crucifixion considered as the sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God— Lamb of God. Conversely Isaac the son of Abraham is *first* offered as a sacrifice, and *then* replaced at the last minute by the 'ram caught in a thicket'. Melchisedech as the priest of the Eucharist is thus quite logically associated with both these prefigurations of the Crucifixion. The mythological equations are that Abel equals Jesus as the son who is himself sacrificed, while Melchisedech equals Abraham as the Priest who makes an offering symbolic of the sacrifice of the son. But he is also the Emperor with his halo.

The Melchisedech picture from the S. Apollinare in Classe [Plate 3] combines elements from the two panels we have just seen. Abel, the Lamb, Abraham and Isaac, the Altar, the Bread and Wine. Melchisedech and the Hand of God. Melchisedech has now however moved behind the altar and sits in a position appropriate to a representation of Jesus Christ breaking bread at the Last Supper. Taken in combination with the previous pictures there is a complete elision of all the mediator-priest-sacrificer figures:—Abel equals Abraham equals Melchisedech equals Jesus Christ.

But notice that there is no actual representation of Jesus Christ; he forms part of the equation only by implication because of Melchisedech's role as priest of the Eucharist. Deity is only explicitly represented as the three-fingered Hand of God piercing the sky and as the three undifferentiated angels sitting close together.[10]

In other words God is present in two natures as the Divine Trinity above the sky and as Priest-Victim-Human Being on earth. There is no hierarchy of superhuman mediators, but there is a hierarchy between human mediator and human commoner— Moses in relation to the Israelites, Abraham in relation to Sarah and Isaac.

Notice how this arrangement contrasts with the Roman picture which I discussed earlier [Plate 1]. Here as you see Melchisedech is offering food and wine to Abraham; he is *not* making a sacrifice to God on High. There is no altar, no background of ritual gadgets, no reference to the Trinity, no royal regalia, no hierarchy between mediator and human commoner. The direct equation is between the bread and the wine in the lower part of the picture and the Christ-Logos in the upper part. Abraham as communicant and Melchisedech as priest have equal standing.[11]

But what is all this about? As I have indicated, the non-canonical mythology of Melchisedech is extensive but for present purposes it will suffice if we stick to the Bible proper, where he is named on only three occasions. I have already given you the Genesis quotation

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where, you will recall, he was described as 'King of Salem and Priest of the Most High God'. This story was taken to be not only the first reference to a pre-figured Eucharist but also the first reference to Jerusalem. This made it a highly appropriate millenarian symbol of new time and the New Jerusalem.

The second mention of Melchisedech comes in Psalm 110 where the King sits at God's right hand as the judge over the wicked and is declared to be 'a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech'. On this account the sect of the Qumran community looked upon Melchisedech as the judge of the last days and gave him a supernatural mediator status as Archangel.

The third Biblical reference comes from the New Testament, but implies a knowledge of Philo's Hellenistic commentary on Genesis written about A.D. 30 where Melchisedech's title of 'King of Salem' is glossed to mean 'King of Peace'. On this basis the Psalmist's reference to the King in his role of 'Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech' would signify that he is King of Peace as well as King of Justice and Righteousness. This makes Melchisedech a very appropriate symbol for a Christian Roman Emperor.

In the New Testament *Epistle to the Hebrews*, the three passages to which I have referred from Genesis, Psalms and Philo are elaborated into a homily which extends over seven chapters.

Melchisedech is described as a being 'without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest for ever'. Jesus is 'the apostle and high priest of our confession' and hence is to be equated with the Psalmist's King who was 'a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech', a role which is contrasted with that of temporary mortal priests 'of the order of Aaron'.

* * *

It should be immediately apparent that the Biblical texts lend themselves to a variety of interpretation. If for example Melchisedech King of Salem is Prince of Peace he can serve to support conservative attitudes but if he is King of the New Jerusalem he is a revolutionary.

It also seems fairly evident that the Roman and Ravenna artists were exploiting different possibilities. But now look again at fig. 2. When I first showed you this diagram I suggested that it could be taken to represent Arian doctrine on the right and orthodox doctrine on the left. Compare the middle section of the right hand column with the Roman picture [Plate 1]. The priest is the channel through whom the charisma of the Christ-Logos is transferred to the bread and wine. The Christ-Logos is visibly present in the immediate situation and is clearly distinguished from the human priest. On the other hand priest and communicant are on the same level. Now look at the left-hand column of my diagram (fig. 2), the schema which represents mediation through sacrifice, and compare it with the Ravenna pictures [Plates 2, 3, and 8]. Notice again how God is invisible above the sky and present only as a hand. This hand points at Melchisedech who poses as the Christ of the Last Supper. He is surely the King of Peace, Righteousness and Justice and a type for Justinian? Though plainly labelled Melchisedech he is Christ in his human nature. Notice too the change of context. Melchisedech is still the priest of the Eucharist but he is now making a sacrifice to a High God from an altar adorned with ritual trappings and he emerges from a palace.

Where the Roman picture might depict a meeting of Quakers or Congregationalists, Ravenna's Melchisedech plainly lives in a world of Bishops and Cathedrals.

The point I have been making is given even more marked emphasis in the apse of S. Apollinare in Classe, the Church containing the seated Melchisedech. Here again there is repetition of hierarchy among the human beings but a careful avoidance of any representation of hierarchy among the deities. Plate 9 shows the apse in question. Right at the top we have a three-layered universe with the layers sharply differentiated. First Christ himself boxed in a circle; then the four Evangelists in their symbolic form in the sky, then the sheep emerging from the walled cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

In the apse proper the design as a whole appears to refer obliquely to both the Transfiguration and the Ascension. At the very top we again have the three-fingered Hand of God pointing at a cross, boxed in a circle, with Christ's head boxed in another circle right at the centre of the cross. On either side of the sky are Elias and Moses. The world below is sharply separated and is dominated by the human figure of St Apollinaris[12] who is very large in comparison with his sheep who are themselves arranged in hierarchy.

The three elevated sheep, two on one side and one on the other are said to be Peter, James and John who were present at the Transfiguration. Here one suspects they represent the Pope of Rome and two of the eastern Patriarchs.

But the relevant point is the 'iconoclastic' cross (Beckwith 1970:54). The artist has gone out of his way to make the Christ figure identical with God on High and to make him seem remote and inaccessible. There is no floating Logos in the sky; there is no explicit God-on-Earth accessible to ordinary men. In the iconography as a whole the identity of the Divine Emperor and of 'Christ as Man' become confused, but there is no ambiguity about the separation between kingly priests and their sheep.

The total implication is rather surprising, or at any rate I found it so: *Visible hierarchy among deities goes with egalitarian politics among men; isolated monotheism goes with hierarchical politics among men.*[13] Second-century Melchisedech was a man of the

people; sixth-century Melchisedech was a Priest-King in an imperial autocracy.

This change in iconographic convention corresponds to a real world shift in the political acceptability of Christianity which accompanied its progression from the inchoate creed of an underworld minority to the formal orthodoxy of a state religion.

I find it interesting that the 'model' that emerges from a study of the iconography should be essentially the same as the model which emerges as the outcome of sociological analysis. An equation of this sort could well have implications for our understanding of contemporary events as well as those of ancient history.

* * *

Let me recapitulate. I have drawn attention to two contrasted theologies. One of these can serve to support the legitimacy of an established hierarchical political authority, the other is appropriate for an under-privileged minority seeking justification for rebellion against established authority. I have made the point that these are not just polar attitudes but dialectical attitudes. The heirs and successors of the advocates of revolution become the upholders of the legitimate establishment. I have argued that this is what happened to Western Christianity between the second and sixth centuries A.D. The whole proliferation of rival doctrines can be classed as belonging to one or other of two wide-spread but polar types—Arian and monophysite on the one side; anti-Arian and dyophysite on the other. The Arians, with rare exceptions, consistently support local autonomy and stand opposed to the centralised regime; the anti-Arians support it.

In this context I have used the three illustrations of Melchisedech for two purposes, first to show that the shift of iconographic convention corresponds to my thesis, and secondly to show that the iconographic conventions themselves have a visual structure which is already implicit in the form of my verbal argument.

But another aspect of my thesis should not be overlooked. As the heretics of one generation move up the social scale and become respectable they become indistinguishable from the established orthodoxy at the top, but that leaves a gap at the bottom within which new millenarian, anarchist, egalitarian heresies will constantly be generated.

Let me commend to you an article by Baden Hickman, published in *The Guardian* on the 19 August of this year, and entitled 'A schism of isms'. It is concerned with the proliferation of 'small unconventional Christian sects' mainly among the lower working-class immigrant population. Hickman notes that in this country there are now over 80 distinct denominations and perhaps 400 or more sectarian congregations. They have titles such as The New Testament Church of God, The Church of God of Prophecy, The Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. 'Periodical disintegration of the various sects seems to do nothing to lessen their fervour. New groupings can be formed overnight'. One anonymous group regularly forms groups of twelve apostles only to disband. Each of the twelve is then commissioned to form a new group of twelve, and so on. . . . 'This', remarks Hickman, 'is an old "cell" technique used by Marxists and traditional evangelical churchmen . . .'. I quote again:—'The attitude of the sects to their white Church neighbours is usually one of smiling politeness. This hides the truth; most of these black Christians see the white Churchgoers as hell bent . . . they believe that their white brothers and sisters are ignoring, among other things, the power and presence of the Holy Spirit'.

'Small unconventional Christian sects' they are, but that is where Christianity began, at the bottom, in a mood of political dissent. Even non-Christian social anthropologists can, I believe, profit by reflecting on such matters.

NOTES

[1] *Ibid.* 23; cf. Cullmann (1967); Brox (1971); Schoeps (1956). For a modern statement of the orthodox view that early Christianity was a unitary church, see Frend (1965).

[2] Marx and Engels (1957) is an anthology of miscellaneous sources compiled by Soviet editors. Few of the items bear directly on the theme of religion. In general, Marx and Engels seem to have held that *in the circumstances of nineteenth-century capitalism* religious belief functioned as a drug which inhibited the working class from achieving full class consciousness and deceived the bourgeoisie into thinking that their interests were those of the ruling class. However, Engels also maintained that the rapid success of early Christianity provides historical evidence that religion may fill a different function under conditions of slavery. In a remarkable passage in 'On the history of early Christianity' (1895) (Marx and Engels 1957:313) he declares that there is a direct parallel between the rise of Christianity in the second century A.D. and the rise of revolutionary socialism in the nineteenth century. The fact that in less than 300 years after its first appearance Christianity had become the state religion of the Roman World Empire 'makes the victory of socialism absolutely certain'.

In short, Engels's Marxism was itself a millenarian cult. He devotes considerable effort to the cabbalistic decipherment of the Book of Revelations, 'proving' among other things that the number 666, 'the mark on the Beast', is a cipher for the name of the Emperor Nero. In another passage in the same essay (p. 327) he draws a direct parallel between the sectarianism of nineteenth-century socialism and the sectarianism of early Christianity.

[3] This generalisation has been challenged—e.g. by Cohn (1962), but is, I believe, broadly defensible. However, there are cases where members of an effete ruling class threatened by imminent loss of influence have resorted to millenarian prophets. Trotsky was inclined to explain the influence of Rasputin in this way (cf. Shepperson 1962:46).

[4] St Ignatius always described himself as 'God inspired'

(cf. Richardson 1953:74–120). Note Richardson's own comment (p. 76): 'the bishop in Ignatius is not only an administrator and liturgical officer; he is also a prophet'.

[5] Beckwith 1970: Plate 9—'Rome, catacomb painting mid fourth century'. Compare the mosaic panel on the same theme in Santa Maria Maggiore (? early fifth century) (Cecchelli 1956: Plate xxxi).

Early Christian treatment of Old Testament themes was probably an adaptation of conventions first established in decorated Jewish synagogues. See Chadwick 1967:279 and various sources listed by Beckwith 1970:168; see also Bianchi-Bandinelli 1955.

[6] E.g. Donatism: see Frend 1952:203.

[7] Augustine (b) XX: Chs 3–29. There is evidence that outside the main centres of political and church authority Millenarian ideas persisted well into the fifth century: cf. Frend 1965:563, note 31.

[8] Dodgson 1854:129 citing Augustine. Note in this respect the distinction made by Shepperson (1962:44) between post-millennial and pre-millennial doctrines.

[9] The best complete set of illustrations is in Cecchelli (1956). It needs to be borne in mind however that these pictures are based on photographs taken *after* the latest series of 'restorations' which were carried out under Papal direction during the 1920's. There have been substantial changes in some of the panels even since the beginning of this century. For a recent survey of

the dating argument see Oakeshott (1967). See also Bianchi-Bandinelli (1955:146–8 and references at p. 146 note 2).

[10] This part of the picture is closely related to one of the panels in the S. Maria Maggiore series. However in the latter Abraham expressly makes his offering to the central 'angel'. In another scene on the same panel the central angel is enclosed in a nimbus implying an hierarchical conception of the Trinity. See Cecchelli 1956: Plate XV and comment at pp. 106–7.

[11] The whole of the right side of the picture has been ruthlessly restored on several occasions and its original form is in doubt. Richter and Taylor (1904) suggested that Abraham was originally on foot.

[12] This Apollinarius (Apollinaris) is a local Ravenna saint and not Apollinariŭs of Laodicea, the fourth century theologian associated with the Apollinarian heresy.

[13] Chadwick's comment that the growth of popular Mariolatry originally represented a Monophysite reaction to Dyophysite Orthodoxy is relevant here:

> popular Monophysite Christology of the fifth Century transferred to St Mary the redemptive value that had been attributed to the humanity of Christ. In a Monophysite devotion Christ as man ceased to be very important; his resurrection was that of a God. Because of this loss of a sense of solidarity between Christ and the human race, the faithful increasingly looked towards Mary as the perfect representative of redeemed humanity (Chadwick 1967:282).

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