

The Papacy and the Historian: Romans and Germans

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As the Roman Empire waned the Church waxed. Inevitably it was a Church deeply affected by *Romanitas*. When the Empire became Christian, if that is the right way of putting it, under Constantine the political centre moved east to the new capital of the Bosphorous, the Washington or Brasilia of the new era. Byzantium became the royal city, Rome the *urbs ecclesiae*, the city of the Church. Inevitably the head of the city of the Church, in view of the hierarchical ideology coming into increasing favour, was taken more and more seriously as successor of Peter. The climax of this early papalism is the pontificate of Leo the Great and the reception accorded to his letter or tome at the council of Chalcedon: the tome and the council set the seal on orthodox Christology. However this undoubted display of successful authority must be seen in its context. Behind the council's Christological decrees lay more than a century of conciliar activity and the production of what are still the orthodox credal formularies: to all this Rome contributed very little. The canon of Scripture had been debated and disputed: the authoritative work of deciding what was to be included and what was to be excluded was done without reference to Rome. It is Leo's intervention which is unusual. His predecessors had not made much effort to settle doctrinal disputes: one feels by this time Christians felt this sort of thing was the job of gatherings of bishops. Leo is unlikely to have felt very differently but as the events of the last generation had shown, the problems of theology had become vital political issues and if Rome had not intervened it seems unlikely agreement of any kind would have been reached. Political pressure simply would not have let a general meeting of bishops come to a purely theological decision, or, since the pressures were not all from the same direction, to a single decision of any kind. Under the circumstances the formula of the council of Chalcedon was a good statement, and as oecumenical as one could have hoped for. It is the more important that the theology behind it was that of one of the most involved and interested disputants of an earlier generation, Cyril of Alexandria, but Leo, speaking with the voice of Peter—he was acclaimed as such at the Council—could make these views prevail where Cyril himself could not carry the Church with him. Also characteristically the Council went on to confer the title oecumenical patriarch on the bishop of Constantinople. This Leo and his successors

rejected for the next 1,500 years but the papacy swallowed it in the end.

A little earlier the most distinguished bishop of the day, Augustine, could write : 'For you I am a bishop; with you I am a Christian. The one is a source of danger, the other of comfort'. The Christian empire was full of such contradictions. On the one hand corporate, hierarchical, notions of authority, especially episcopal authority, were prevalent, on the other traditional suspicion of status seeking, or even status holding, that go back to New Testament times when St James warned against respect of persons, was still strong. Naturally, when political conditions allowed, it seemed right that gatherings of bishops ought to represent the Church, and enable the Holy Spirit to speak out clearly, by their numbers sorting out the leaven from the lump. But by the fifth century the limitations of the conciliar approach had become clear. If political problems are grave enough and political interests seriously contested, councils can only exacerbate and prolong dispute. This was shown again clearly enough at the end of middle ages, when so called conciliar theories, though attractive to modern liberal thinkers, only served to promote the subservience of the clergy to the lay princes and to prolong schisms that everyone was inordinately tired of. It is well to remember that conciliar solutions to authority are dangerous solutions suited to very few times and places, of which the present time is not one in my opinion. But if councils did not work, in the Christian Empire it was natural to turn to a single source of special authority. In this world that could only be Rome, and the New Testament texts were readily married to Roman traditions.

Nowadays it is fashionable to deplore Constantine and the very foundation of an imperial Church. But what else could have happened? In what other way could the Church have survived the Roman Empire? Further, the imperial Church was a Church with a much larger measure of freedom than the Church has usually had. Freedom, in large measure was granted by a succession of emperors; more important, liberties were taken without asking by an impressive number of great churchmen of whom Athanasius and John Chrysostom in the east and Martin in the west must stand for the many more who could be named. It is true that the interpretation of Mat. xvi becoming increasingly current was far from a literal reading of Scripture, but it was a theological interpretation prompted as much by the needs of the Church as by the vanities and ambitions of romanised intellectuals. Nonetheless it is unwise to turn these texts into title-deeds for an eternal form of Church government. Necessities change and forms of authority with them. It seems of particular relevance to this way of looking at traditions to study what happened when the secular world of imperial Rome fell, its social and economic order with it, and how the Church and its ecclesiastical romanism fared in that situation.

I spoke of the fall of imperial Rome but this can be misleading. Misled, perhaps, by St Augustine's insistence on treating the family as a natural unit and every other kind of social group as a consequence

of original sin, we tend to overestimate the bureaucratic element in imperial Rome and to miss the fact that the imperial establishment was a network of great families. The bureaucracy certainly very largely disappeared or was very much diluted in the process called in the text books the fall of the Roman empire, but the families had a different history. By the end of the empire there were two preeminent families, the Symmachi and the Anicii who between them held vast estates in Gaul, the Levant, Italy, and Africa. The famous Symmachus was one of the last upholders of paganism, who fought, unsuccessfully, to retain the traditional pagan cults for the traditional occasions against St Ambrose. However, on the principle of Tetley's Bittermen, unable to beat the Christians the family joined them. By 494 there was a Pope Symmachus. More centrally there was the senator Symmachus and his son-in-law from the Anicii, Boethius, the famous philosopher. These families did their best to survive the Empire. In 478, the last Roman emperor in the west had been deposed by the Ostrogoths. However the deposition made little difference to Romulus Augustulus' life-style, he went on being what he had always been, one of the richest landowners in Italy. A rather younger member of the Anicii was Ennodius, born in Provence in 474, who became bishop of Pavia. Ennodius studied in Pavia, was ordained and became secretary to the bishop of Milan, the see of Ambrose it should be noted, about 500. He ran a school for scions of his own and like blueblooded families. One of them, Parthenius, was grandson of the Emperor Avitus, but returned to his native Gaul where he became not an imperial aristocrat, but a senior minister of the Frankish king. Ennodius had an even more spectacular career of living in two worlds and surviving.

Ennodius was used as a diplomat and was sent as imperial ambassador to one of the most powerful of the parvenu Germanic kings in the west, Euric, the ruler of what was now Visigothic Spain. Euric regarded Ennodius as of more weight and substance than the imperial master who had sent him: Ennodius seems to have shared the same view. The other Goths, the Ostrogoths, had taken over Italy and Ennodius joined the Ostrogothic establishment, like his kinsmen, Symmachus and Boethius, serving even as King Theoderic's ambassador to the Byzantine court. In many ways the Roman aristocracy had never had it so good since the days of the principate of Augustus. The Goths were Arians not Catholics. It may be doubted if they were so out of theological conviction. For them Christianity was the Roman religion and it is at least arguable that their Arianism was, in one sense accidental. They wanted to adopt the religion of Rome, they happened to meet 'it' in the person of Arian missionaries and then they found themselves up against the implacable snobbery of Roman Christianity. For generations there had been no missionary activity. Christians had taken from *Romanitas* the notion that *imperium* was bounded by the sea and covered the entire civilised world. Outside were the *barbaroi*, meant in a sense more intense even than that of ancient Greece. One has the feeling that the Arianism of the Goths was a welcome fact that enabled social superiority to be maintained without violating Christian

duty. So long as the Roman Christians refused to accept the Germanic peoples as political equals the Germans maintained their Arianism: as the Roman provincials began to feel they had more in common with their barbarian provincial neighbours than the Romans of distant imperial courts, so the barbarian Arianism faded away. At least partly the Romans' change of heart had to do with the servile unrest that threatened their position and their wealth, and the usefulness of the barbarians in helping to stamp it out. The very great families, the Anicii and the Symmachi, could not maintain their original position in the face of this unstoppable tide of provincialism, but the families of the second rank could and did.

When Theoderic was king of Ostrogothic Italy and the Symmachi at the height of their power, the King's secretary was one of the most famous literary men of the day, Cassiodorus. Cassiodorus came from a parvenu family of purely Italian ambience. His great-grandfather had founded the family fortunes. Not of the senatorial aristocracy, he had helped defend southern Italy from the Vandals, who moved on to besiege Hippo as Augustine lay dying. The head of the family in the next generation moved up in the world and served as ambassador to the terrible Attila in the days of Leo the Great. Cassiodorus' father was mainly known as a horsebreeder, but on a positively Texan scale and was said by Theoderic himself to be capable of supplying the entire Gothic army with horses. He served as governor of southern Italy for Theoderic, and his son, Cassiodorus, was launched on his career at the Gothic court at Ravenna. Cassiodorus was Italian in a way Symmachus and Boethius were not. In the end the Goths could not trust them and they fell utterly. Cassiodorus had no dangerous connexions with Byzantium. He never fell from Gothic favour but with Justinian's reconquest of Italy his days of office were over and he withdrew to his south Italian estates to found a famous monastery. We shall never know the full story but it seems likely that families such as Cassiodorus' abounded in the new Germanic kingdoms and a very important element of continuity of kindred groups survived at what had once been provincial level.

So far I have looked at the process from the Roman point of view. Of course, continuity of kindred group is not everything and there is no doubt that part of the process of surviving involved the shedding of a good deal of Roman polish and a considerable shrinkage in the area of Roman education. But what of the Germans? They had no social and little cultural cohesion. They fought each other as readily as they fought Romans: on the whole they allied with Romans rather oftener than they allied with other tribal groups.

In spite of nationalist historiography the Germans were not a cohesive cultural, let alone nationalist, group. They did not call themselves Germans at all. The name seems to be of Celtic coinage and was taken up by Latin speakers. The whole class of peoples—some of them at least partly Celtic—who were disturbing the easy enjoyment of Roman upper-class life were dubbed *Germani*. It is probable that the term, like *Frank*, the name of the most important segment of *Germani*, was

a term more akin to wog or nigger than a national name like French or Dutch. Recently Professor E. A. Thompson in his brilliant study *The Early Germans*, has elucidated the effects Roman proximity had on Germanic society in the days between the writings of Caesar and Tacitus. I do not know whether Dr Thompson had this in mind but it is difficult not to think of US policies in Latin America when looking at what seem to have been Roman policies towards the Germans.

The early Germans seem to have been a poor, largely agricultural, people. As depicted by Caesar they recognised differences of status but in the strict Weberian sense of the word, they had status groups but no permanent social classes. They did however have the institution of the sworn and temporary *comitatus*. A *comitatus* was a sworn confederacy, voluntarily entered, and directed towards previously defined and violent purposes. Once the oath was taken, social pressures tended to ensure the individual did not back out. Once the purposes had been achieved the *comitatus* disbanded, leaving the survivors richer than before. It looks very much as though the Romans kept the Germans in order by favouring particular *comitatus*, giving them some kind of subsidy. Consequently the *comitatus* became bigger, more permanent and began to look like a superior, established social class in Germanic society. Unfortunately our evidence virtually disappears for generations after Tacitus. When, by the end of the Empire, they re-appear, now mainly as invaders, but invaders with a penchant for Roman things and often enough prepared to make alliances with the Roman establishment on pretty easy terms, they have a quite new set of names. All the tribal names known to Caesar and Tacitus have disappeared and strange names like Frank and Goth have taken their place. Only an internal German catastrophe could explain the disappearance of traditional political nomenclature on this scale. The new tribes had few—and these few were manifestly false—traditions about their origins and recent research has remorselessly destroyed the authenticity of the Germanic customs enshrined in the many codes of barbarian law. These laws are mainly Roman laws, the vulgar Roman law of the late Empire, and their very comprehensiveness suggests that the so called tribal groups had lost their ancestors' customs as well as their names.

It is difficult not to think, in spite of the lack of evidence, that *Germania* had been as deeply affected by the internal troubles of *Romania* as the imperial provinces themselves. A set-up of this kind was dependent on imperial subsidies and the economic well-being of the imperial paymasters. When economic crisis and political division became acute it seems to me that the Roman-created *comitatus* groups might either collapse, tending back to the kind of society depicted by Caesar, which there is a little evidence to suggest did not happen, or else the privileged groups had to go into the Empire and find a substitute for subsidies on the spot. What is clear is that the invading tribes were socially rather indeterminate and had very little cultural cohesion. After a century of persistent identity and political cohesion, after Justinian's campaign, the Vandals—who were supposed to all originate

in a single village on the shores of a Norwegian fjord—disappear from history without trace. The Franks on the other hand once fitted into a third of modern Belgium and four generations later occupied an area very nearly as large as the original Common Market. Fustel de Coulanges very nearly got it right over a century ago when he envisaged the Germanic peoples as gangs of brigands, of rather ad hoc composition, who turned into nations: in the case of the Franks with a very large admixture of Roman provincial landowners.

It will be obvious that most of the traditional explanations of the fall of the Roman Empire, including that of Marx, in so far as he had one, are rather besides the mark. Bemused by Roman towns and Roman *urbanitas* students have, until recently, failed to give enough weight to the fact that the Empire was an entity resting economically on the countryside and the peasantry. It may be asked, though the question will not be easily answered, whether at the peasant level the fall of the Empire was all that noticeable, and it may be wondered if in fact for the largely Celtic peasantry of say Gaul or Britain (I do not think there is much doubt that the racial stock of the 'English' is largely Celtic, if this matters, which I do not think it does) the 'catastrophe' was not a source of economic improvement. However the peasant continued to live very near the margin of subsistence throughout the middle ages so if there was any improvement it cannot have been very great. But for all that, I do not think the peasants of Anglo-Saxon England were exploited in the grim fashion depicted by Professor Apfelbaum in his essay on Roman Britain in the *Agrarian History of England*.

What concerns us here, however, is not what happened to the peasants but what the Church did about the political and social changes at the other end of society. By the second half of the sixth century it was obvious that Justinian's attempt to restore the Mediterranean littoral to Roman rule, if in the rather Levantine version obtaining in Constantinople, had failed. There had been a marriage of Roman survivors with 'germanic' invaders to a greater or lesser degree. In Gaul, there was now a ramshackle but recognisably sub-Roman kingdom of the Franks, in which the half naked Franks, their hair greasy with rancid butter and with manners to match, as Byzantine historians like Procopius still depicted them, had become part of the same establishment as the descendants of the great Gallo-Roman aristocracy of classical times. It is very instructive to compare Procopius, who writes of the Franks in the typical tones of a member of the *Herrenvolk* speaking of inferior orders and Gregory of Tours, himself a descendant of a long line of Gallo-Roman aristocrats and proud of it, who writes of the Franks rather as a member of the British aristocracy might write of the Americans when on the look out for an heiress to marry. In Spain, the Visigothic kingdom, once the Goths had become Catholics, there was an integration of peoples especially at the level of the governance of the Church, more intense than anywhere else. In Italy, Justinian's attempt to put the clock back had certainly prevented the Ostrogoths maintaining what might have been the most

romanised succession state of them all, and left the way open for the Lombards, perhaps the most brutal, primitive and anti-Roman of all the Germans. In Britain, always a backwater for imperial Romans (one recalls Vergil, in the Eclogues, 'Britain another world', he meant the back of beyond), the Angles, alias Saxons (the terms are synonyms) had taken the province over and managed to remain pagan in the process but had still acquired some *Romanitas*. Catholicism was, for the new ruling class, the spiritual expression of *Romanitas*. What was wanted were churchmen prepared to accept this for what it was and what it implied.

These recent pagans-cum-arians had little spiritual culture of their own to stand in the way of a conventionally Catholic indoctrination. It was *Romanitas* and the kind of Roman Catholicism represented by the Symmachi and the Anicii that stood in the way, not German obstinacy. Basic doctrines had to be restated, and restated in the vernacular, since however romanised the new establishment might be it was seldom Latin speaking. Such institutions as the Germanic peoples possessed, of an unfamiliar kind, such as the feud, had to be evaluated. Some discriminations were required. It couldn't be helped that the new converts found the Old Testament to their taste much more than the New: Cain and Abel were much more intelligible than the Magnificat to a people for whom the feud was a matter of daily routine. If, to orthodox minds, they had a strange preference for St Michael as a cult figure to more central biblical personages, with more than a suspicion that the reason was that he could without too much difficulty be equated with Woden, then these were things to be dealt with in the long term. But their polygyny and their noxious custom of widow-inheritance (most surviving primitive peoples would have shared Gregory the Great's distaste for the sexual habits of the primitive Anglo-Saxons; habits common probably to many, if not all, of the pagan Germans) had to be tackled *instante*. But if a significant group of churchmen were prepared to sink their Roman prejudices they had prospects of success. The new Catholics, the new Romans, lacked any convincing source of legitimacy. They seem to have had few of the kind of customs left to which appeal might be made. We know little about the pagan priesthood except that one existed but it seems to have no function of legitimating. But in the new dispensation, when kingdoms such as that of Francia, were in the making and yet depended on a selective survival of ancient traditions, as much as on a judicious elimination of equally ancient but inconvenient ones, only the Church was a convincing source of legitimation. In particular the Roman Church had here a potential source of strength. The pope was now heir to Augustus as well as Peter. He presided over what was left of imperial Rome, as well as sitting, quite literally in the chair of Peter, presiding over the relics of the apostles and martyrs. Such things had an enormous attraction for Catholic Germans, however limited their grasp of Christian things otherwise, and brought them to Rome, which even in decay never seemed to fail of making an effect by its sheer physical grandeur, in great numbers. For conservative Romans,

and there were many, these things were not noticed or not thought important, but for someone who could clear his mind of imperial nostalgia, realise that the age was an unpleasant one but grasp the potential for improvement it nonetheless placed in his hand a rare opportunity of making changes in society of a very fundamental kind.

To put it more generally this was one of those times of transition from one kind of society to another. Marxists have always thought the early medieval period was just a social crisis, but the kind of Marxism that posits an economic basis on which art, culture, and morality, are superstructures, has not much right to. I do not see that the economic basis of early medieval society was all that different from the classical world. It was all paid for out of the surplus value, such of it as there was, of the peasant's labour. The crisis is in the superstructure. The change is in the ruling class and ultimately in its assumptions about social relations and values, not the least over how to acquire the greatest amount of status for one's money. These changes were orchestrated, even to a point stage-managed, by churchmen, because only they had the resources to do so. What was involved was a re-interpretation of Rome and Roman, of Catholic and pagan. Paradoxically just because no one was left more Roman than the pope, the pope had the power to redefine Roman in a way much more conducive to the welfare of the Church. The time had come when *Romanitas* and Catholicism might for a time go their separate ways. This is why the pontificate of Gregory the Great is much more important for the history of the papacy than any of the pontificates of the Constantinian Church.