Introduction

In the beginning was the Word . . .

It is no longer a novelty to hold that societies have characteristic discourses or "plots," or that the development and control of a given discourse may provide a key to social power, or even that an inquiry into the dissemination of knowledge by oral or written means ought to be high on the agenda for historians. A religion that succeeded (if slowly) in establishing itself as the prevailing religious system of the wider society to which it was at first only marginal, and laid a quite exceptional emphasis throughout this process on the verbal articulation of the faith, must cry out for analysis in these terms.

There is an enormous and ever-growing bibliography on the "rise" of Christianity. Its progress from marginal cult to world religion has, it would seem, been studied from every angle—theological, sociological, historical. Naturally, a great deal of attention has already been paid to early Christian literature of all kinds, and to its manner of expression, whether rhetorical, linguistic, or conceptual. One of the central themes studied has been the relation of Christianity to a supposed Greco-Roman background, and specifically to Greek terminology and literary forms. It will be seen that I start from the position that this attempt to separate the Greek "elements" in early Christianity is fundamentally misleading. Although it is not the subject of this

book, scholars have also been concerned to relate Christian texts and modes of expression to Jewish ones. Current research into the history of Judaism in the imperial period suggests that the older notion of separability is as difficult to sustain here as it is in relation to Greek culture.

At the moment there is indeed a particular emphasis in works by theologians and students of the New Testament on the application of literary analysis to Christian texts. But on the whole, histories of the development of Christianity in the Roman Empire written by historians and from the historical point of view have focused more on its social and institutional dimensions than on its modes of expression. There are two reasons for this: first, it is part of the wider indifference among historians to the use of literature (as distinct from "literary sources") as evidence,[1] and second, it stems from the well-established practice of leaving Christian texts aside except where they seem to provide factual evidence.

But most of us now are more conscious of the sheer power of discourse, even in societies like the Roman Empire where communication was as a rule extremely poor. The very fact that Christianity was able to spread and become established as it did in such unpromising conditions asks for analysis in these terms. It is clear that Michel Foucault, who has been more than anyone responsible for this changed awareness of the importance of discourse in history, was thinking a great deal at the end of his life about the question of how Christianity was able to develop what we can call in his terms a totalizing discourse.[2] Foucault's interest was directed in the first place toward the sphere of morals and especially toward the history of the individual; but there

1. F. Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. S. Fischer, D. Forgacs, and D. Miller (London: Verso, 1988), 18, refers to "the adamantine lack of interest that historians 'proper' have always displayed towards literary (and more generally, artistic) historiography."

2. See M. Foucault, *Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

are many other points of view from which Christian discourse needs to be investigated if we are to understand its general evolution in the early period. While these lectures were being revised there appeared the first volume of Michael Mann's *Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), which uses a more political approach to the analysis of early Christianity while still stressing the importance of discourse. One might quarrel with some of the positions taken (the author is a sociologist, not a Roman historian), but it is nevertheless striking to find the degree of emphasis laid here on the "systematic moral life plan" and "transcendent ideological power in human history" offered by early Christianity in relation to its growth in the context of the Roman Empire. What is different, then, in these approaches from the familiar strategy in which Christian ideology plays a secondary role in relation to economic and institutional factors is the stress laid on articulation and ideology as dynamic factors in themselves.

Quite apart from these considerations, the post-structuralist analysis being applied to New Testament texts cries out to be carried over into other early Christian literature, in particular theological writings. Why not ask what kind of texts these are, or how they seek to represent Christian truth, and in what ways they can be related to the general culture of the Roman Empire? At the same time, when even history itself has been feeling the effects of the heightened awareness of rhetoric, it ought to be obvious that the older style of empiricist analysis of early Christianity is due for revision. At the very least, we might expect to see a greater stress on its rhetorical strategies and—in view of recent work on orality and the significance of writing—on the role of communication, written and oral, in its spread. It has barely been noticed as yet what an extraordinarily suitable field early Christianity provides for this kind of inquiry.

That the nature of early Christianity was in fact multiform,

especially in the earlier stages, is less an argument against seeing its eventual success in the Roman Empire in terms of the sociology of knowledge than part of the answer to the question of how it succeeded. For the study of Christian discourse in the Roman world is the study of reception, and this is a two-way process—not merely how Christian discourse made its impact on society at large, but how it was itself transformed and shaped in the endeavor. Christian discourse would have been different without the environment of the Roman world; and that environment itself was subject to geographical and diachronic variance. What we study is a dynamic process in which both sides are changing.[3]

It is not my aim here to try yet again to explain the rise of Christianity. A call has been made for a greater use of archeological evidence in studying ancient religion.[4] But no one explanation can be adequate. A whole battery of concurrent or converging explanations is needed, which will only in part be related to the nature of Christianity and the particular characteristics of Christian communities. It is equally necessary to consider the changing nature of the Roman Empire itself. We should not forget that, just as one would expect in so traditional a social structure, Christianity was extremely slow to achieve a dominant position. Some modern books give the impression that the conversion of Constantine brought an immediate transformation of society, but the truth was far otherwise.[5] So these lectures take a broad chronological sweep. I have chosen to begin effectively with the second century (though the reader will naturally

3. This is more readily recognized in relation to Christian art than to Christian writing: see, e.g., "early Christian art is never a naive, storytelling art," in T. F. Mathews, "The Early Armenian Iconographic Program of the Ēĵmiacin Gospel (Erevan), Matenadaran MS. 2374, *olim* 229," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period,* ed. N. G. Garsoian, T. F. Mathews, and R. W. Thomson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 200.

4. G. Fowden, "Between Pagans and Christians," *JRS* 78 (1988): 173–82.

5. For a skeptical view, see R. MacMullen, "What Difference Did Christianity Make?" *Historia* 35 (1986): 322–43.

find many references to the first-century New Testament texts) so as to avoid the technical and highly disputed issues of Christian origins and the domain of New Testament scholarship proper. But I am also concerned with the place of Christianization in the transition to "late antiquity," and I wish to make a further connection between the Christianization of the Roman Empire and the nature of representation in the early Byzantine world; the final chapter deals therefore with the bridge between the two: the Eastern Empire in the sixth century.

Finding suitable terminology is difficult. Rather than a single Christian discourse, there was rather a series of overlapping discourses always in a state of adaptation and adjustment, and always ready to absorb in a highly opportunistic manner whatever might be useful from secular rhetoric and vocabulary. Nevertheless, in totality they did in the long term come to dominate social discourse as a whole in both East and West; I hope then that it may be legitimate for convenience to use the singular term "discourse" without being accused of distortion. I mean by it all the rhetorical strategies and manners of expression that I take to be particularly characteristic of Christian writing. It certainly does less than justice to the subject as a whole to concentrate on written texts, or on texts that would have been read only by an educated audience (though chapters 2, 3, and 5 emphasize the communicative power of such Christian forms as the apocryphal narratives and the homilies delivered week after week in the churches). But we can only dimly reconstitute the power of the spoken word, even when we know that it was great, and the critic must start somewhere.

Many early Christian writers were already preoccupied with the question of the nature of Christian discourse, as they debated the relation of Christian to classical rhetoric, or the problem of reaching the uneducated in their preaching, or the nature of Christian knowledge, and especially the problem of how Christian truth could be represented in words at all. Yet few of

them doubted that it was essential to make the attempt. And this evolution of an organized system of thought and expression, at once flexible and all-inclusive, did mark Christianity off from pagan cults.[6] Moreover, Christianity had a special relation to textuality. As Geoffrey Harpham has recently argued, it was centered on texts and took its metaphors from them: "the Christian God is modelled on language."[7]

This is not a theological book. I write from the standpoint of a historian, although I have deliberately used the techniques of sociology of knowledge and literary theory. My concerns are twofold: to show that a large part of Christianity's effectiveness in the Roman Empire lay in its capacity to create its own intellectual and imaginative universe, and to show how its own literary devices and techniques in turn related to changing contemporary circumstances.

A series of lectures on such a theme can do no more than suggest some general directions. The selection of material is necessarily partial and impressionistic, and any reader will find many gaps. In particular, the footnotes provide a running commentary that is no doubt more illustrative of my own interests and reading than it is comprehensive; I hope, however, that they will serve to locate the main argument in a wider context and suggest further lines of inquiry. As far as the main text is concerned, my aim has been less to present a detailed justification of any one part of the argument than to make a series of suggestions; together these attempt to present a coherent, if partial, view of the whole.

One particularly important element in the formation of Christian discourse is almost entirely omitted here, namely the his-

6. W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 66–88, argues against attempts to find comparable pagan "theologies."

7. G. G. Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 17.

tory of the Bible and its reception. Christians of whatever background in the early centuries formed their discourse on and around the Scriptures, so that what they wrote could often turn into a counterpoint of biblical types and biblical phraseology. Nevertheless, I have chosen to concern myself primarily not with the relations of Christians to their own texts, but with Christian discourse in the context of the discourses of society at large.

Again, the absorption into social discourse at large of scriptural models and language is an integral part of the process I am trying to trace, although it has not yet, I think, been analyzed from that point of view. But because that would take far more space than I have available, I have preferred to select certain other themes relating to Christian discourse in the broader sense. Thus, in contrast to the common emphasis on the distinctiveness of Christian writers, it is basic to my approach that they be seen as reflecting and responding to the same influences that were making themselves felt on pagan discourse. They were both less and more distinctive than they themselves supposed. Indeed, the prominence of the notion of the *difference* between Christian and pagan expression in the work of the Christian writers themselves is to be read as a rhetorical device and a symptom of adjustment rather than as a description of a real situation. It was a theme that, as we shall see again and again, allowed them to exploit that difference even while ostensibly defending themselves against pagan criticism. As for the occasional pagan complaints about the uncouthness of Christian literature, having begun with exaggeration, they go on to testify to the growing strength of the very phenomenon that they deplore. Christian and pagan writers alike indulged in a species of metadialogue serving the purposes of both sides.

Similarly, it is tempting to read the gradual progress of Christian discourse to center stage as representing a taking over of elite culture by popular, whether in terms of encroaching "irrationality" or an eventual "democratization" of culture. Running

through the book, therefore, the reader will find the suggestion that these terms, as usually used, are unhelpful or ill defined. It is true of Christianity (and one of its major strengths) that it was inclusive in a way in which pagan culture always remained elitist; the most sensitive Christian thinkers were acutely aware of this advantage and paid a great deal of attention to its exploitation by the effective presentation of the faith at all intellectual and social levels, and by the widest possible means. But that is quite different from suggesting, as is often done, that the general adoption of Christianity implied the defeat of the intellect and the triumph of popular religion.[8] Any halfway adequate explanation of the phenomenon must do as much justice to the appeal of Christianity to the most highly educated, and to its most sophisticated theological formulations, as to any supposedly popular piety or superstition.

In these lectures I have therefore given theological discourse—writing about God—a central place in the context of explanations of the spread of Christianity. If it is significant (as I believe it is) that Christianity developed a systematic world-view, it must also be important to understand how its more technical aspects were formulated. Since the Christian faith and the Christian world-view were expressed in language, as well as through moral example and ritual action, the definitions and formulas of theology proper can hardly be marginal to their impact. Theological writings—the technical treatises of Christianity—will thus be given as much weight and attention here as other historical documents, for they represent stages in the formulation of Christian knowledge. In order then to understand the evolution of a Christian world-view, we must look not only to stories, as in the Gospels or the apocryphal *Acts* or, later, the

8. A.-M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 32–56, rightly refuses to separate Christian and pagan taste, but then speaks of a "naiveté commune."

Lives of saints, or, for instance, to the moral and interpretative content of sermons, but also to the philosophical and rhetorical argument of theological treatises. The question then arises how this world-view was constituted—whether the discussion should be confined to mainstream or "orthodox" works. It is an important part of my argument that the very multiplicity of Christian discourse, what one might call its elasticity, while of course from the Church's point of view needing to be restrained and delimited, in fact constituted an enormous advantage in practical terms, especially in the early stages. No account of Christian development can work if it fails to take this sufficiently into account. I therefore draw equally on the apocryphal and "popular" stories, which, it can be argued, were of as much importance in formulating the Christian synthesis as the canonical texts.

Very little ground can be covered in six lectures, and I have limited myself mainly to the Greek tradition; there is much less than there should be, for instance, on the contribution of the Eastern churches and their literatures, even though there is a growing tendency among specialists to bring the Greek and the Eastern traditions together instead of emphasizing their differences.[9] A great deal more could be done, too, to explore the connection between Christian discourse and the language of contemporary philosophy, for although it may seem that there is already a vast literature on the subject, it has in most cases focused on content rather than on mode of expression. Whereas the idea of the interpenetration of Christian texts by Greek philosophical ideas and language is commonplace, what that re-

9. See H. J. W. Drijvers, *East of Antioch* (London: Variorum, 1984); and S. H. Griffith, "Ephraem, the Deacon of Edessa, and the Church of the Empire," in *Diakonia: Studies in Honor of Robert T. Meyer,* ed. T. Halton and J. P. Williman (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 22–52, esp. 52.

lation contributed to the development of a specifically Christian discourse is, I think, yet to be told. Probably the most serious lack, however, is the absence of a Jewish dimension, which in this compass I have not felt able to supply. A proper account of the rise of Christianity will from now on have to include a far better understanding of the actual pervasiveness of Judaism in the empire after the Diaspora than we have had to make do with up to now. Between the death of Jesus and the surviving records of his life and sayings lay the destruction of the Jewish Temple: "in the Gospels we meet, not the world of Jesus, but the very different, more tense, world of his disciples."[10] Already the infant faith had left the Palestinian *chora* behind for the cosmopolitan world where Diaspora Jews and Jewish sympathizers mingled with Greek and Roman pagans.[11] The interpenetration was such that even after several centuries some texts remain hard to classify. At risk of some distortion, then, I keep my focus on features that I have taken to be typically Christian ones.

Peter Brown's book *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) came out at a late stage in the preparation of these lectures for publication. Whereas both in general terms and in view of the prominence of asceticism as a theme in Christian texts it inevitably covers some of the same ground, it does so from a different perspective altogether. Brown's emphasis is not on textuality; although he several times raises the question of the relation of the texts he uses to "real life," his own inquiry remains within their parameters.

Nevertheless, even while these lectures were being written and thought about, I have on many occasions found my views

10. P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 41.

11. On Jesus and Judaism, see E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); and cf. his *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

confirmed in general terms by work being done in other periods or by scholars in different disciplines. In particular, literary studies and a literary approach to the texts now seem to constitute a strong current in contemporary theological writing. Not histories of Christian literature in the traditional sense, but analyses—deconstructions, in fact—of the texts *qua* texts, and the consciousness of the social power of such discourses. But such approaches, familiar to New Testament scholars, have only rarely been extended toward other sorts of Christian literature. Some moves have been made in this direction by anthropologists, especially in the analysis of individual doctrines, but they have not on the whole been concerned with the specifics of discourse as such; in addition, they have more often been concerned with practice than with the actual formulation of belief. One would also have thought that there would have been a greater body of work directed toward early Christianity in the field of sociology of knowledge, where Mann's book is still unusual. His identification of ideology as a source of social power and his positioning of ideology not as secondary but as integral to the multiple, varied, and overlapping networks of power that constitute society[12] points unequivocally in the direction of regarding Christianity in the Roman Empire as an important source of power relations. I am concerned to show that this tendency did not simply follow the acquisition of economic or political power by the church, or its association with the state, but was present in the very roots of Christianity. Paul, who had never seen Jesus and whose writings are earlier than the first of the Gospels, established the precedent that Christianity was to

12. See Mann's own comment on the unevenness of the scholarly literature concerning the development of Christianity, which tends in his words to be either "inspirational" or "doctrinal," i.e. either committed or marginalized and technologized; see M. Mann, *Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 303; also chap. 1.

be a matter of articulation and interpretation. Its subsequent history was as much about words and their interpretation as it was about belief or practice.

The subject lends itself with peculiar appropriateness to a methodology based on hermeneutics, and I have learned much from this direction; it is an approach that also leads to the questioning of historical method and the nature of history, and to the problem of how truth can be known and expressed. Now that these are central issues for all kinds of historians,[13] we come back yet again to Christianity as a major arena of hermeneutics and a fit subject for our time.[14]

All kinds of questions cluster around the "rise of Christianity." J. B. Bury could still think of the conversion of Constantine as demonstrating the power of contingency in history: "it is hardly likely that unassisted by the stimulus which privileged position and power of persecuting gave to proselytising the Church would in less than 150 or 200 years have embraced such a majority of the population that it could have imposed upon the state its recognition as the exclusive religion."[15] This view is still held in the name of history, usually by rationalists like Bury himself, as is the complementary one, more overtly ideological and based on an idealized and nostalgic view of the Christianity of the Gospels, that Constantine's conversion in fact irrevocably corrupted the faith.[16] Such views obscure the fact that we have

13. See my collection *History as Text* (London: Duckworth, 1989).

14. These considerations are also often close to the hearts of feminist theologians who must rescue the text of Christianity if they are to save themselves; see in particular E. Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1983).

15. See J. B. Bury, "Cleopatra's Nose," *RPA Annual for 1916*, 16–23; reprinted in *Selected Essays of J. B. Bury*, ed. H. Temperley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 60–69. This famous essay was preceded in the previous year and followed in the next by others forecasting the eventual demise of Christianity in the light of human progress.

16. For this view, see, e.g., A. Kee, *Constantine Versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology* (London: SCM Press, 1982).

in the spread of Christianity a problem of the first dimension in the social history of the empire, in the course of which Constantine marks a convenient but not an all-important landmark. Literacy, communication, the spread of ideas, the use of reading and writing, the organization of social groups, the establishment of restrictions on belief, the institutionalization of practice and belief together—these are only some of the other issues involved. The spread of Christianity follows the general history of the empire. As it came to prevail it provided plots according to which the majority of the inhabitants of the empire, and after that of Byzantium and the medieval West, lived out their lives. For any kind of cultural historian it is a subject of the first order.

Finally, a problem with the word "rhetoric," for I do not (obviously) use it in its technical sense, but rather in the current, far looser sense it seems to have acquired, by which it can mean something like "characteristic means or ways of expression"; these modes may be either oral or written, or indeed may pertain to the visual or to any other means of communication. It will be seen that the theme of visual art becomes increasingly central as these lectures progress, for I see the subject of Christian representation as involving both the visual and the verbal. More than that, I would argue that despite traditional (and controversial) Christian opposition to figural representation, a Christian figural art was the inevitable product of the ways of seeing embedded in Christian language. It follows that the Iconoclastic movement of the early Byzantine period has its roots in the problem of Christian representation witnessed from the very beginnings of Christianity and not merely in contemporary circumstances or recent theological disputes. The increased attention paid to religious images and the debates about their significance that become such a feature of Byzantine life from the sixth century onward constitute a crisis of representation whose roots lie in the very nature of Christian discourse. Even after the defeat of Iconoclasm, the Byzantines would retain a particularly

acute consciousness of the relation between the Christian word and the Christian image.[17] A larger book than this could use more extensive illustration to bring out the interconnection between verbal and visual discourses; even so, those interested in Christian art will not fail to see the connection.

At present we are in danger of seeing rhetorics behind every tree. But it is still useful and important to ask how Christians, the quintessential outsiders as they appeared to men like Nero, Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius, talked and wrote themselves into a position where they spoke and wrote the rhetoric of empire. For it is perfectly certain that had they not been able to do this, Constantine or no Constantine, Christianity would never have become a world religion. This, simply, is the subject I had in mind in these lectures.

17. I have developed these ideas to some extent in a lecture given at the Collège de France in 1987 and hope to write on them again elsewhere, but they fall outside the scope of the present book.