1

Memory of the Dead in Early Christianity

"Treasure in Heaven"

When Latin Christians of late antiquity thought of religious giving, they went back to what for them was the beginning—to the words of Jesus. The words of Jesus to the Rich Young Man encapsulated the whole notion of the transfer of "treasure" from earth to heaven: "And Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.'"[1] Jesus repeated this challenge to his disciples: "Sell your possessions and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys."[2]

This notion was also current in Jewish circles. In the Jerusalem Talmud of the late fourth century, there is a story about

King Monobazos, the Jewish king of Adiabene on the Euphrates. He was said to have spent his fortune on providing food for the poor in Jerusalem. His infuriated relatives accused him of living up to his name, which was derived from the word *bazaz*—"to plunder." Monobazos was plundering the earthly inheritance of his family. He answered them at length: "My fathers laid up treasure for below, but I have laid up treasures for above. They laid up treasures in a place over which the hand of man may prevail: I in a place over which no hand can prevail . . . My fathers laid up treasures for others, I for myself. [For] my fathers laid up treasures useful in this world, I for the world to come."[3]

The commands of Jesus and the story of King Monobazos urged or described heroic acts of renunciation and generosity. By the third century AD, however, in both Judaism and Christianity, the gesture of giving had become miniaturized, as it were. One did not have to perform feats of heroic self-sacrifice or charity to place treasure in heaven. Small gifts would do. But the notion of the transfer of "treasure" to heaven by acts of mercy retained its otherworldly shimmer. Cyprian, for instance, treated the steady, low-profile flow of alms to the poor as a form of "thesaurization" in heaven on the same footing as the renunciation of all wealth that Jesus had urged on the Rich Young Man.[4]

In Christian circles, the notion of "treasure" placed in heaven through almsgiving colored perceptions of other sayings of Jesus. For instance, Jesus had also told the story of the Unjust Steward. This steward had used his tricky financial dealings to make friends, so that those who were obliged to him might take him into their houses once he had been dismissed from his job. Jesus concluded: "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means

of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations."[5] Christians of this period took this to mean that those who received money from believers (whether the recipients were holy persons, clergymen, or the poor) would welcome these believers into their dwelling places in heaven. Indeed, believers could even build their own mansions using the funds that they transferred to heaven through acts of charity on earth. Heaven was not only a place of great treasure houses, it included prime real estate in a state of continuous construction due to the good deeds performed on earth by means of common, coarse money.

This notion was summed up in a delightful story told in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, which were written in 594:

There was a pious cobbler, Deusdedit, in Rome (so Gregory tells us). Every Saturday he took a portion of his week's earnings to the courtyard of the shrine of Saint Peter at Rome. With these he gave alms to the poor who assembled at the shrine. The result of the cobbler's charity was revealed in a vision to a pious person. The vision was of a house being built in heaven. But this happened only on Saturdays. For Saturday was the day on which Deusdedit went to Saint Peter's to give alms to the poor. The house was the cobbler's "mansion" in heaven, built by the "treasure" that he had transferred to heaven every Saturday through his gifts to the poor.[6] A similar vision revealed that these mansions were treasure houses in themselves. They were built with bricks of pure gold.[7]

Gregory stood at the end of many centuries of Christian giving inspired by the notion of the transfer of treasure to heaven through almsgiving. Gregory's stories circulated largely

unchanged and unchallenged for a further thousand years. But, when one turns to present-day scholarship on this theme, we find that the idea of "treasure in heaven" is surrounded by a loud silence. Neither in the Catholic *Dictionnaire de la Spiritualité* nor in the Protestant *Theologische Realenzyklopedie* is there an entry on *trésor* or on *Schatz*. Nor can such an article be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. Indeed, it is only recently (in 2013) that the lucid and refreshingly uncensorious study of Gary Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition,* has offered a satisfactory analysis of the relation between almsgiving and the accumulation of "treasure in heaven" in the Old Testament, in later Judaism, and in early Christianity.[8]

Even the few articles devoted to the theme of "treasure in heaven" have approached it with ill-disguised embarrassment. In one such study, Klaus Koch insisted that, when Jesus spoke of "treasure in heaven," he must have meant something very different from the meanings that came to be attached to it in later centuries. Belief in the direct accumulation of treasure in heaven through almsgiving on earth (which was illustrated so vividly by the stories of Gregory the Great) was dismissed by Koch: It was "*für den Protestanten eine abscheuliche Vorstellung*"—"a notion abhorrent to any Protestant."[9]

Modern Catholic authors have been no less reserved when confronted with this notion. A large grave inscription erected over the tomb of the famous bishop of Arles, Hilary (430–449), declared that the bishop, through his renunciation of wealth, had "bought up heaven with earthly gifts."[10] There is no hint of embarrassment in those proud lines. Not so with their modern in-

terpreters. The editors of a 2001 catalog of the early Christian monuments of Arles suggested, somewhat timidly, that such a phrase might strike a modern person as "a formula which certain of us . . . would no doubt have found somewhat abrupt or heretical!"[11] It is the same in Jewish circles. Faced by the tale of King Monobazos, even the great Jewish scholar Ephraim Urbach felt ill at ease. He confessed that it was difficult to see, in Monobazos's "prolonged and monotonous explanation . . . traces of a more refined doctrine . . . [some] sublimation of the materialistic simile of collecting treasures above through squandering them below."[12]

Altogether, we are dealing with a notion that causes acute embarrassment to modern persons. Such embarrassment is calculated to make the historian of religion sit up and take notice. Why is it that a way of speaking of the relation between heaven and earth that late antique and medieval Christians took for granted seems so very alien to us? Perhaps it is we who are strange. Why is it that we have such inhibitions in approaching the subject of the joining of God and gold?

Faced by the need to explain modern inhibitions, the religious historian is well advised to turn to modern anthropologists. Their work reminds us that we, as modern persons, are out of step with past ages. They have pointed out that our particular notion of exchange is the product of the commercial revolution of modern times. As the anthropologist John Parry makes clear: "As economic transactions become increasingly differentiated from other types of social relationship, the transactions appropriate to each become ever more polarized in terms of their symbolism and ideology . . . Western ideology has so emphasized

the distinctiveness of the two cycles [religious relations with heaven and commercial transactions on earth] that it is then unable to imagine the mechanisms by which they are joined."[13] Nowadays, the thought of such a joining of religion and commerce strikes us as something more than a harmless exercise of the imagination. Rather, it has the quality of a joke in bad taste.

Modern anthropologists have done well to explain part of our inhibitions when confronted with the images in which early Christian and medieval giving practices were saturated. But these inhibitions are not solely a modern phenomenon. As Marcel Hénaff has shown in his brilliant and extensive meditation *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy,* ancient philosophers, from Socrates onward, made a clear distinction between ordinary exchanges for ordinary goods and the existence of goods so precious and so nourishing to the mind and soul (such as their own teachings) that they would be tarnished and diminished by being connected in any way with mere money.[14]

Early Christians were well aware of this tradition. They appealed to it relentlessly when attacking the rituals of their rivals—pagan and Jewish sacrifice, for instance, in which large outlays were involved.[15] But they retained the great images of the transfer of treasure from earth to heaven and of the preparation of heavenly mansions through regular almsgiving. These were much more to them than "mere" metaphors. To adapt the title of a modern book on the role of metaphor in structuring social cognition, these were "metaphors to live by."[16] The constant use of the metaphor of "treasure in heaven" charged the circulation of money, on all levels within the churches, with a touch of the glory of heaven.

The notion of placing "treasure in heaven" through almsgiving remained a "metaphor to live by" for Jews and Christians because, in the words of Gary Anderson in his book *Charity,* the act of almsgiving "allowed the individual to enact the miracle of God's grace" on earth. Even a small gift to the destitute mirrored the mercy of God to a human race that was as totally dependent on Him for its survival as beggars were dependent on the rich for alms. Almsgiving triggered the ultimate hope of a world ruled by a Creator who would reward mercy with mercy.[17]

Furthermore, on a more subliminal level, the notion of treasure in heaven gripped the imagination because it seemed to join apparent incommensurables. To transfer money to heaven was not simply to store it there. It was to bring together two zones of the imagination that common sense held apart. In an almost magical imaginative implosion, the untarnished and eternal heavens were joined to earth through "unrighteous mammon"—through wealth that was traditionally associated with all that was most transient and, indeed, with all that was most sinister, on earth—all too heavy with associations of violence and deceit and, even when honestly come by, still smelling of the grave. If the brutal antithesis between heaven and earth, pure spirit and dull matter, could be overcome in this way, then all other divisions might be healed.

Not the least of these divisions was the gulf between rich and poor. In the Christian imagination, the joining of heaven and earth was refracted (in miniature, as it were) through the joining of two persons (or groups of persons) in incommensurable social situations—the rich and the poor—through the gift

of alms. Hence we should not imagine that the relation between rich and poor in Christian circles was governed only by compassion and by a sense of social justice. Christians could be compassionate. Their reading of the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament) kept them fully aware of the passionate concern for social justice of the prophets of ancient Israel. But both Jewish and Christian giving to the poor always involved something more than that. Almsgiving was not only a matter of "horizontal" outreach to the poor within society. It evoked a symbolically charged "vertical" relationship. It tingled with the sense that almsgiving created a bridge over a chasm that was as vertiginous as that which separated earth from heaven, and human beings from God.

For, like God, the poor were very distant. Like God, the poor were silent. Like God, the poor could all too easily be forgotten by the proud and the wealthy. Hence there was an imaginative weight, for early Christian readers, in the seemingly matter-of-fact reminder of Saint Paul in his Letter to the Galatians "that we should remember the poor." For by remembering the poor, pious believers (Jewish and Christian alike) took on something of the vast and loving memory of God. God never forgot the poor, while human beings—whether because they were proud or simply because they were too busy—found the poor to be, alas, eminently forgettable.[18]

In this way, "to remember the poor" was seen as a joining of opposites that echoed, in society itself, the paradoxical joining of heaven and earth, of base money and eternity, and of God with humanity. Without such perilously anomalous bridges (each of which flouted human common sense), the universe itself would

fall apart. The rich would forget the poor. The living would forget the dead. And God would forget them all.

Rich and Poor in the Church—Rome, 140 AD

One should add that the transfer of treasure from earth to heaven through almsgiving was not the only great image with which Jews and Christians sought to bridge the many chasms that played a vivid role in their imaginative world. Other images addressed the same problem—how to join the seemingly unjoinable. In order to appreciate this, let us turn for a moment to the parable of Hermas, a Christian prophet who was active in Rome sometime around 140 AD. Walking in his farm outside Rome, Hermas noticed a vine trained over an elm tree. The vine was fruitful. The elm tree was dead. He noted: "I am thinking about the elm and the vine, that they are excellently suited to each other . . . This vine bears fruit, but the elm is an unfruitful stock. Yet this vine, except it climbs up the elm cannot bear fruit. The rich man has much wealth, but in the things of the Lord he is poor, being distracted by his riches. But the poor man, being supplied by the rich, makes intercession for him."[19]

The rabbis faced a similar juxtaposition of potentially irreconcilable groups within the Jewish community. These antithetical groups were not simply the rich and the poor. Talmudic scholars were also contrasted with the ignorant common people—the *ammei ha-aretz*. A vivid rabbinic saying resembles the parable of Hermas. It spoke of the fruitful and the unfruitful parts of the vine so as to show that each contrasted group in the Jewish community (though poles apart in many ways) was

dependent upon the other: "This people is like unto a vine; its branches are the wealthy, its clusters are the scholars, its leaves are the common people . . . Let the clusters pray for the leaves, for were it not for the leaves, the clusters could not exist."[20]

In both cases, the image of the vine was used to conjure up an ideal of organic, almost subliminal, symbiotic unity. Matter and spirit, fruitful vine and mere unfruitful wood, earthly treasure and heaven (all of them normally considered to be antithetical and mutually exclusive) could be seen to flow into each other. At stake in the Christian communities in Rome, as with their Jewish neighbors, was not simply how to care for the poor but how to maintain solidarity in a community in which the poor represented one pole alone (but a highly charged pole) in a culturally and socially differentiated group.

This preoccupation with solidarity, and with the overcoming of potential cleavages, fitted very well with what little we know of the social composition of the Christian communities in Rome that Hermas had addressed. In the second and third centuries AD, most Christians were not rich. Most thought of themselves as *mediocres*—as respectable, middling persons, such as had always found a social niche for themselves in large cities like Rome and Carthage. Their charity was not spectacular. It was low profile and effectively limited to fellow Christians. There was little or no outreach to the pagan poor. Rather, the average "poor" person in the Christian communities was a fellow believer down on his or her luck.

For this reason, we should be distrustful of the high-pitched language of Christian writers and preachers of this and later times. They wished to present Christian giving as the joining

of mighty opposites. Their language drew a notional crevasse between rich and poor across what was, in reality, a socially low-profile and relatively unstratified community. What mattered for such authors was not to feed the masses but to conjure up imagined antitheses within the Christian community that only Christian charity and Christian prayer could overcome.[21]

It is important, however, to realize that the maintenance of a sense of solidarity in the Christian communities involved far more than the circulation of money. Ritual practices that combined almsgiving with intense prayer on behalf of fellow Christians (whether living or dead) played an even more central role in maintaining solidarity among Christians than did charity to the poor alone.

The crucial issue was how best to express solidarity with the dead. In this, the practice of intercessory prayer was decisive. Prayer was thought to bridge the most poignant of all crevasses—the ultimate, chill chasm between the living and the dead. What was distinctive in Jewish and Christian circles was the manner in which relations with the dead echoed closely the metaphors associated with the notion of "treasure in heaven" accumulated through alms to the poor.

Almsgiving to the poor became an irremovable part of the celebration of Christian funerals and memorial meals. And it did so, in no small part, because the state of the physically dead echoed with chill precision the state of the socially dead. Both the dead and the poor were creatures reduced to ultimate helplessness. Both depended on the generosity of others. Both cried out to be remembered in a world that could all too easily have forgotten them. But to forget either the dead or the poor was

doubly abhorrent to religious groups, such as Jews and Christians, whose worst fear was that their God might forget them.[22] Let us now see how these powerful imaginative tensions worked out in practice for Christians of the late third century AD.

Dining at the *Triclia* at San Sebastiano, 250–300 AD

Circa 250 to 300 AD, Christians who walked out from Rome along the Appian Way to what are now the well-known catacombs of San Sebastiano would have made their way to a walled enclosure standing in the midst of ancient tombs. The enclosure was lined with benches and protected by a loggia. It boasted a well and a little kitchen. It was one of the many *tricliae* that offered banqueting facilities to those who wished to celebrate their loved ones by funerary meals in proximity to their tombs. In the homely words of Richard Krautheimer, this third-century *triclia*—discovered in 1915–1916 beneath the fourth-century basilica built at what is now called San Sebastiano—"was like any tavern on the green."[23] It was in this unprepossessing building, like any other *triclia,* that Christians met to celebrate with a meal in the proximity of their dead. The meal was called a *refrigerium,* a feast of refreshment and good cheer. It was thought to mirror the rest that the departed soul was believed to have come to enjoy.[24]

In the word *refrigerium* alone we are introduced to a very ancient Christianity, such as we have conjured up through the writings of Cyprian and, above all, of Tertullian. For many believers, this was still a Christianity of waiting souls. There was no doubt that the souls for whom the *refrigerium* meal was cel-

ebrated did not wait in despair, or even with impatience. They relaxed, and they did so with an exquisite sense of relief. They were, at last, released from the sufferings of this world. We can see what this meant in the remarkable prison diary of the African martyr Perpetua. While awaiting death in Carthage, in 203 AD, the martyr Perpetua experienced two dreams about her brother Dinocrates. Dinocrates had died young through a terrible cancer of the face. Her first vision of him was grim: Ill-dressed, his face marred by a great scar, he was straining in vain to reach the edge of a cistern of cool water. In the second dream, Perpetua saw Dinocrates at last at peace: "And Dinocrates drew near the water and began to drink from it. Having drunk his fill, he went further in from the water, and began to play as a little child would do, rejoicing."[25] Whether this *refrigerium* was imagined as a state of waiting or as a final rest in heaven, this was how one would wish to think of one's beloved at rest in the other world.

Many of those who celebrated a *refrigerium* of this kind recorded the meal and the prayers that accompanied it in graffiti written on the painted walls of the enclosure. Around 330 of these graffiti have survived.[26] For a historian of the Christian Church, it is a moving experience to come across these scribbled phrases. In a Christianity that we know of largely from assertive written works (such as those of Cyprian) and from dramatic and grisly accounts of the deaths of the martyrs, we come, at last, to an oasis of peace. Great happenings seem far away. Here we can listen to quiet voices—to ordinary Christian men and women of the generation before Constantine practicing their religion at the graves of their heroes and of their relatives.

Memory of the Dead and Memory by the Dead

What is it that we hear? What we hear above all is a tenacious work of memory. Not only do the living remember the dead, that was normal practice shared by Christians with pagans. What is distinctive about these Christian graffiti is that they reveal that the living prayed intently to be remembered *by* the dead.[27] The first evidences of the cult of Peter and Paul (who were believed to have lain for some time beside this humble banqueting space) take the form of prayers that ask for us to be remembered:

> *Petre et Paule, in mente habetote.*
> Peter and Paul, have [us] in mind
> Holy Spirits, hold in your mind.[28]

But these prayers were not addressed to the great martyrs alone. They were also made to the ordinary dead as they enjoyed their *refrigerium*. The tombs of Peter and Paul formed the principal focus of the graffiti on the walls of the *tricliae* at San Sebastiano. But even there, dead relatives and fellow believers were asked to pray for the living. Elsewhere, requests to the dead for their prayers were often written poignantly close to the grave, on the fresh plaster that surrounded the small marble plaque that bore the name of the deceased.[29] The request to the dead for their prayers runs as a refrain through the Christian inscriptions:

> *Ianuaria, bene refrigera et roga pro nos.*[30]
> Januaria, take your rest well, and ask for us.

But what exactly was it to "ask," and, especially, to "hold in the mind"? Here, I think, we are dealing with notions of the

working of memory that are different from our own. For early Christians, as for many other ancient persons, memory was far more than a passive storage space. It implied an act of will. In the ancient world, memory was the tool of social cohesion par excellence. Patrons held clients to them by remembering and rewarding their services. In return, clients were careful to remember their patrons, even to the extent of solemnly celebrating their birthdays.[31]

Altogether, there was an element of militancy in the use of memory in the late antique world. To "remember," to "hold in the mind," was not to store away a fact: It was to assert a bond; it was to be loyal and to pay attention to somebody. Memory was as much a gift to the potentially forgotten dead in the other world as almsgiving was a gift to the all-too-easily forgotten poor in this world. In the same way, "forgetfulness" was nothing as innocent as mere absence of mind. To forget was an aggressive act. It was an act of social excision that severed links that had previously been established by an equally purposive act of memory.

In practice, to remember was to intercede. Peter and Paul were held to further the prayers of human petitioners by presenting these prayers to the memory of God. The prayers recorded in the graffiti were frequently characterized by this double appeal to memory—they asked for the petitioner to be remembered by the holy dead who, in turn, had the power to mobilize the memory of God: "Peter and Paul *apetite pro Dativu in perpetuum,* pray perpetually for Dativus."[32]

It is important to recapture the intensity with which the Christians who wrote these graffiti linked memory with

intercession. As Claudia Rapp has shown, belief in the power of intercessory prayer accounts for much of the authority of Christian bishops and of Christian holy men and women throughout the late antique period. She has rightly urged us to take account of the dense network of relations between believers established through belief in the power of prayer.[33] As Augustine remarked in passing in the *City of God,* the phrase "*Memor mei esto*"—"be mindful of me"—had become almost a colloquialism: It was the conventional phrase with which Christians took leave of pious fellow Christians.[34] In the Christian imagination, the silent flow of intercessory prayer wrapped even the most low-profile Christian community in a perpetual flicker of divine power.

Tertullian had written proudly, in his *Apology,* of the power of prayer among the Christians: "We gather in an assembly . . . and, as if we had formed a military unit, we force our way up to God by prayer. This power—this *vis*—is pleasing to God."[35] The *vis orationis*—"the power of prayer"—was central, also, to the imaginative world of those who wrote the graffiti at San Sebastiano. But what did this power of prayer achieve?

Not all of these prayers were prayers for the souls of the departed. Many were frankly directed toward earthly benefits and to protection in this world. One group asked for a safe sea voyage: "that they should sail well through the power of prayer."[36] But, whatever the objects of the prayers, the principal aim of intercession of all kinds was to hold together entities that common sense treated as incommensurable. Antithetical worlds were joined through intercessory prayer. The flexing of the muscles of memory joined the dead to the living and God to human-

kind in an intense bond. The afterlife was very real to those who wrote these inscriptions. But (to use a spatial image) it did not hover high above them. It was next door. And it was kept close by prayer.

Rich and Poor: Heaven and Earth, 250–650 AD

One cannot but think that, in these Christian communities, there was a congruence between the sense of almost symbiotic bonds between the living and the dead and the bonds between each other that these groups imagined in their own society. The dead were thought to be as close to the living as the living were expected to be as close to each other. We are looking at relations between the living and the dead that reflected a view of the Christian community as a place where social boundaries were relaxed, both in this world and in the next. The other world, like the Christian community, was seen as a place of ease. Pagan burial imagery featured bucolic landscapes and peaceful gardens. Christians picked up this imagery with enthusiasm. It did justice to their own notion of the relaxed and joyful state of the souls of the departed. This bucolic art also echoed a similar sense of relaxation among the living. It summed up a countercultural longing for a religious community that avoided, as much as possible, the blatant hierarchies and abrasive differences in wealth and status that characterized the dark "world" outside the church.[37]

The fact that, by 300 AD, many Christians were already wealthy, cultivated, and even powerful, did not contradict this representation. Rather, it caused well-to-do Christians to work

even harder in their imaginations to overcome divisions of which they were only too well aware. A pastoral imagery expressed to perfection the "deep humane dreams" that haunted well-to-do believers of the late third century—dreams of the relaxation of hierarchy in a privileged, secluded place.[38]

Hence there is a paradox that cannot but strike the historian. We end with two significantly different views of the little banqueting space in the tombs beside the modern church of San Sebastiano. In many ways, what we see (and rightly value) is an intimate and cheerful group, rooted in a long Roman tradition of sociability. Like the similar meetings of the *collegia* (the voluntary associations that proliferated in the Rome of the second and third centuries AD), there is an agreeably homegrown quality about such meetings. In the words of Eberhard Bruck, discussing the *collegia: "Sie haben das Parfüm von Chianti und Salami"* ("they have about them the reassuring smell of chianti and salami").[39] But this cheerfulness cannot be taken for granted. For, if we look at this group another way, we see that the imaginative world of its members was riven with notional crevasses. These seemingly cozy Christian communities saw themselves as struggling, through an intense work of intercessory prayer and almsgiving, to join a series of mighty incommensurables—God and man, heaven and earth, rich and poor, living and dead.

No small part of the theme of the following chapters will be the manner in which these notional crevasses widened under the pressure of new circumstances. The gap between rich and poor became sharper and more contested. After the conversion of Constantine, and most notably in the late fourth century, truly rich members of the Roman upper class joined what had hith-

erto been a distinctly low-profile institution—a church of the *mediocres* in the true Roman sense of the term. The *triclia* and its inscriptions were covered over by a gigantic shrine of the apostles. This shrine became a fashionable burial place. By the end of the fourth century, its apse was lined, on the outside, by the large family mausoleums of minor senators and public servants.[40] The martyrs themselves became that much more distant. The apostles Peter and Paul were declared to have "penetrated the ethereal depths of the sky." This language echoed just those pagan notions of apotheosis through ascent to the Milky Way of which Christian theologians of an earlier time had disapproved.[41]

The language of prayer itself lost some of its intimacy. It became insensibly hardened by osmosis with the forms of the ruler-subject and patron-client relationships that prevailed in the hierarchical society of the fourth century AD. The saints were no longer seen as partners in prayer. They became *patroni*—"patron saints"—in the late Roman sense. They stood as intercessors between the average believers and God, much as great noblemen, as patrons and protectors, represented their submissive clients at the court of the emperor.[42]

Furthermore, the impact of the entry of the rich into the church was heightened by the rapid emergence, at the same time, of the poor as objects of greater public interest. Having hitherto been largely invisible in Roman society at large, the poor became charged figures in the social imagination. After the conversion of Constantine in 312, the poor now flooded the churches. They needed charity on a far greater scale than previously. They were largely anonymous and very different from the brothers and sisters down on their luck whose care had made the workings

of Christian charity in the third century so effective because it was so much more "homey" and manageable.

As a result, the "vertical" aspect of almsgiving—that stressed the stark drop between God and humanity, rich and poor—gained ever-greater prominence. The anonymous poor who had come to crowd around the churches were "others," and no longer "brothers," and it became more difficult to see almsgiving as a gesture of solidarity, as had been the case when the poor were known fellow believers. Rather, it became easier to see almsgiving as a purely expiatory action that involved little or no bonding with the poor themselves. Acts of mercy to the faceless poor simply mirrored (and so could be thought, on some level, to provoke) the acts of mercy by which a distant God cancelled the sins of the almsgiver.

Dead and living also drifted apart. By the end of the fourth century, bishops such as Augustine came to regard with increasing suspicion views of the afterlife that seemed to present the dead as hovering in too comfortable a manner around the living. Notions of the easy flow between the living and the dead in dreams and visions came under suspicion. At the same time, bishops also challenged burial customs (such as feasting at the grave—and especially at the graves of the martyrs) that assumed too cozy a relationship between the living and the dead. For these customs seemed to them to make the fate of the soul after death more predictable than it was in reality, and to make the initiatives of the living appear more effective beyond the grave than they—the bishops—considered to be theologically correct. Only certain forms of remembering the dead—notably almsgiving, prayers, and the celebration of the Eucharist—were deemed to

be of any use to the souls of the deceased in the other world. A jolly party at their grave was not enough to nourish them. But nor (as we will see) was a special tomb sufficient to protect them.

Finally, the gradual penetration of Latin theology by Platonic ideas that stressed the immediate ascent to heaven of the disembodied soul sharpened the sense that some Christian souls were more clearly bound for heaven than were the souls of average believers. By the 380s, if not earlier, inscriptions at Christian graves all over Roman Italy declared that the souls of the departed had already reached the starry heavens associated with pagan notions of apotheosis. Those who were praised in this flamboyant manner were not martyrs. They were simply Christians whose high birth alone encouraged the living to ascribe a high destiny to them.

"Let no one think that sublime souls go down beneath the shades" was said of a Christian wunderkind in Bolsena.[43] Tertullian, by contrast, would have been quite content to urge the young man to wait in "the shades" until God had finished His mighty business with the universe. But the members of the Christian aristocracy of fourth-century Rome were not prepared to mark time in this manner. For example, Proiecta was the daughter of a major official. Her spectacular silver wedding casket can still be seen in the British Museum. When Proiecta died—alas, as a young woman—she was declared by no less a personage than Pope Damasus to have "gone away, only to climb up into the eternal light of heaven."[44] It seemed as if such persons had left their fellow Christians far behind, even in the afterlife.

We learn of this development from elegant marble plaques, covered with long inscriptions in classical verse, replete with

echoes of Virgil. It is not irrelevant that the cost of carving such inscriptions was roughly fifteen gold pieces for nine lines. And this was at a time when the average Christian grave plaque displayed barely a few phrases of distinctly homespun Latin.[45]

In the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, as we shall see, the distance between heaven and earth seemed to yawn more widely. From the time of Augustine onward, believers were encouraged to be more conscious of the burden of their sins. Their unexpiated sins were increasingly thought to expose them to danger in the other world. Altogether, average Christians felt further away from heaven than ever before. Their souls were imagined to travel more slowly and at ever-greater risk—past demons and through flames of fire—toward an increasingly distant heaven.

Manichaean Questions

But in 300 AD, all this lay in the future. Let us end this chapter by abandoning the little *tricliae* now buried beneath San Sebastiano and travel three thousand kilometers to the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire—to Syria, Egypt, and Mesopotamia—to make the acquaintance of the followers of Mani, who are known to us as Manichaeans or Manichees.

It may seem like a digression to examine a Christian sect that originated in faraway Persian Mesopotamia, but to study Manichaeism is to be reminded of the Middle Eastern roots of Christianity itself. Mani was the product of a Christianity of the third world—of the world east of Antioch—that had spread far beyond the cultural and linguistic frontiers of the Greco-

Roman Mediterranean. He lived on the eastern edge of a linguistic zone that was characterized by the dominance of Syriac, the last and the most creative version of an ancient Aramaic that had once been the lingua franca of the Achaemenid Empire and that had been spoken by Jesus of Nazareth himself. From Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, Mani and his followers addressed populations that spoke the same language as themselves. He wrote all but one of his works in Syriac.[46]

Because they shared in the religious lingua franca of Syriac Christianity, the Manichaean missionaries and leaders of local communities (known as "the Elect") mingled easily with bands of mendicant Christian ascetics who had already begun to walk the roads of the Middle East. Altogether, Mani and his followers were by no means exotic intruders. Mani regarded himself as the Saint Paul of his own times. The Manichees claimed to come as reformers of the Christian Church, not as its enemies. In many regions, Manichees settled down on the margins of the mainline Christian churches. They claimed to be the representatives of a superior, more spiritualized form of Christianity.[47]

An accident of survival has ensured that the bulk of Manichaean literature known to us from within the territories of the Roman Empire is in Coptic, the language of the ancient Egyptians in its last phase. For what we now possess of the literature of Manichaeism is what has been preserved for us, in the form of large papyrus volumes, in the bone-dry sands of Egypt. But these precious volumes are only the remnants (translated from Syriac into Coptic) of one of the great religious literatures of the Syriac world. For Manichaean literature was rapidly translated into Greek and Coptic in the wake of the astonishing advance

of the missionaries of the "Holy Church" of Mani throughout the eastern provinces of the empire.[48]

Mani died in 277. Many of the Coptic Manichaean documents date from less than a century after his death. This seemingly exotic religious leader from Babylon and his disciples were almost exact contemporaries of the Roman Christians whose *refrigeria* and prayers to and for the dead at San Sebastiano we have just described. More astonishing yet, recently available Manichaean evidence from Egypt shows that the Manichees touched on the same issues, in the course of their sustained dialogue with local Christians, as did our Christian Romans. The memory of the dead was crucial to them also.

To be seen in conjunction with the Manichees might have startled the good Christians in the *tricliae* at San Sebastiano. Mani not only lived a long way away but the Manichees were a radical group. Like many extremist groups, they may not have drawn their recruits from among adherents of the mainline churches. Most of their converts may have come from dissatisfied splinter groups from within what were, already, radical communities. In their view of the ascent of the soul and its attendant perils, for instance, the Manichees were more Gnostic than the Gnostics.[49] The slow rhythms of a world of waiting souls were not for them. Rather, their image was of souls at risk, as they ascended, as quickly as possible, to the Kingdom of Light, past serried ranks of malevolent powers. Yet these souls also needed help from the living, and, when it came to this help, what the Manichees described and reinterpreted, so as to fit them into their own worldview, were the commonplace Christian practices

that were believed to help the souls of the departed. Any pious diner at the *triclia* of San Sebastiano would have recognized these practices—the giving of alms, acts of memory, and intercessory prayer, and therefore they are directly relevant to our discussion.

So let us turn to the Manichaean text known as *The Kephalaia of the Teacher.* It was, originally, a mighty volume of more than one thousand pages. It was called the *Kephalaia* because it was a book of "chapters." Each had its own heading and was devoted to a specific topic. It amounted to an encyclopedia of Manichaean doctrine. The papyrus sheets that have survived date from around 400 AD.[50] The *Kephalaia* is claimed to be the record of an exchange of questions and answers between Mani and his disciples. In fact, they were written after his death in 277, but it is possible that they were not written too long after. This means that what we read in the *Kephalaia* are descriptions, from the inside, of a radical Christian sect as it engaged the religious practices of its Christian neighbors. The discussion concerns central aspects of normal Christian rituals connected with the dead as they were practiced in the decades immediately before and after the conversion of Constantine. It is a glimpse as unexpected and as revealing as are the humble graffiti discovered in the *tricliae* beneath San Sebastiano.

What we find is a heated debate on precisely the same rituals that are apparent in the graffiti and in other fragments of evidence for the care of the souls of the dead in the Christian community of Rome and elsewhere. We find the same rituals, if with slightly different names: the giving of alms (the *mn̄tnae*), the giving of a Eucharistic oblation (the *prosphora*), the celebra-

tion of a "love feast" (the *agapé:* the Greek and Coptic equivalent of the *refrigerium*), and the "making of memory" (*ṙmeue*) on behalf of "the one who comes out from the body."[51] But what is most revealing is the tone of the questions. The questions that the Manichaean rank and file—the catechumens—posed to their teacher were very much the questions that any Christians would have posed about the rituals of their own church: to put it bluntly, do they work?

This was the principal theme of *Kephalaion* 115. It is summed up in the title:

> The Catechumen asks the Apostle: will Rest *(matnes)* come about for Someone who has come out of the Body, if the Saints [the Elect] pray over/for him and make an alms-offering (*ṙoumñtnae*) for him?[52]

The question touched on the very essence of the relation between the living and the souls of the departed:

> So now I beseech you, my Teacher, that you may instruct me about this matter, whether it is true.
> For it [that is, almsgiving for the dead] is [a practice] very great and honored among the people.[53]

To which the teacher replied, in effect, "Make my day." He reassured his questioner that, when performed in the Holy Church of Mani, such practices worked. He told the catechumen exactly why and how they worked—and that they worked on a grandiose cosmic scale. Great powers would gather to protect the soul: "And through your holy prayer, asking from God that, to those in whose name the table [of the feast for the dead, or,

perhaps, the Eucharist] has been set up, a [heavenly] Power may come. And so, from the God of Truth, will a Power be sent; and it comes and helps the one for whom the offering—the *prosphora* [the Manichaean equivalent of the Eucharist]—has been performed."[54]

In this way, Mani linked the departure of the soul to a grandiose myth of the ascent of the soul through a cosmos filled with protective and hostile powers. Yet the rituals themselves, which Mani interpreted in this ambitious manner, were straightforward. Many were shared by Manichees and mainline Christians alike. We are looking into a world where alms offerings, oblations, and "the making of remembrance" for the dead were common practices. They were "very great and honored amongst [all] people."

Faced by the widespread and unproblematic presence of day-to-day Christian funerary and commemorative practices—alms, memory, the love feast, and the Eucharist—the issue for the average Manichee (as for every average Christian) was not really *how* these rituals worked, but *whether* they worked. It is on this point that Mani's cosmic explanation reassured the catechumen. Now the catechumen could be certain that:

> alms on his behalf and a remembrance on his behalf [of the one who has died], for his brother, for his father, or his mother or his son, or else his daughter or his relative who shall come out from the body . . . [If] he has made alms . . . He did not lack his hope.[55]

Indeed, Mani encouraged the catechumen to continue these practices.

> What you are doing is a great good . . . you redeem it [the passing soul] from thousands of afflictions.[56]

What set Mani apart was his conviction that only in his Holy Church did rituals for the dead work. In *Kephalaion* 87, *On Alms,* he made plain that the followers of "every sect" (by which he meant all previous Christians—and, perhaps, also Jews and, even, Zoroastrians) gave alms in the name of God. But only in the Holy Church of Mani would these alms "find a place of rest" in heaven: "It is the Holy Church [of Mani] that is the place of rest for all those who shall rest therein; and it becomes a doorway and a conveyance to the Land of Rest."[57]

Manichaean documents from Kellis, a town excavated beginning in the 1980s in the Dakhlah oasis of the Western Desert in southern Egypt, show how important these rituals were in the day-to-day life of Manichaeans. The letters and even the account books of Kellis are scattered with references to the *agapé* offered for the souls of the dead.[58] It was a matter of sadness, among the Manichees of Kellis, that one old lady should have died without the consolation of such rites: "We are remembering her very much and I am distressed that she died when we were not with her and that she died without finding the Brotherhood gathered around her."[59]

From Mani to Augustine

We would leave behind Mani and his ideas were it not for the fact that, when we move forward in time for one century, to the days of the aged Augustine, we find that the problems that Mani

had been called upon to answer had not gone away. In 422, Augustine came to write his *Enchiridion* (a *Ready-to-Hand Book of Christian Doctrine*). Like the author of the *Kephalaia,* he wrote the *Enchiridion* to address problems posed by a lay enquirer. It was written for Laurentius, possibly a well-educated resident of Rome. He was the brother of an imperial agent active in Africa.[60] Laurentius's uncertainties were exactly the same as those addressed by Mani: Did rituals for the souls of the dead work, and, if so, how did they work?

As we shall see in the next chapter, Augustine's answer—deeply pondered after thirty years of meditation and of pastoral work—was the opposite of Mani's. While Mani had expatiated in great detail on the cosmic processes that made rituals for the Manichaean dead efficacious, Augustine was remarkably reticent on how the Catholic rituals for the dead were supposed to work. His answer was, basically, "God only knows, and He is not telling." Augustine limited himself to saying that oblations for the souls of the dead were a custom handed down from the apostles. For this reason, Catholic Christians were to maintain them. Mani also had said the same.[61] But, when we ask how these oblations work in particular, and for what particular categories of persons, Augustine presents us with the immense silence of God.

The answers of Mani and Augustine may have been different, but we should note the convergence of concerns between the two men. Both were aware of a lacuna in their own systems. Clear on the otherworldly destinies of saints and of great sinners, neither could make sense of an ever-more pressing phenomenon—the average sinner. Both were challenged, in

effect, to explain how the rituals of the living impinged on the vast majority of those who lived in the "grey zone" of Christian eschatology—in the tantalizing twilight between the glory of the saints and the black darkness of the reprobate.

For Mani, the lacuna in his system was particularly blatant. We learn from *Kephalaion* 92 that Mani had even drawn a complete picture of the universe. But his disciples pressed him to explain why, on this cosmic map, he had found no place for those of the Middle Way: "Why did he not depict the Middle Way of the catechumens. Why did he not show how the catechumen [rather than the saintly Elect] goes out of the body and how he is brought before the Judge?"[62]

Augustine found himself confronted by exactly the same questions. In order to reassure Laurentius, he took refuge in a trenchant formula. He offered what can best be called a Van Ness diagram of the other world. In this diagram, only in the area of overlap could ritual action by the living be thought to affect the fate of the dead. The prayers and oblations of the faithful were not relevant to the *valde boni*—the "altogether good," for they could be assumed to have reached heaven with no difficulty. Nor were they relevant to the *valde mali*—the "altogether bad," for they could be assumed to be either already in hell or surely destined for hell. The friction point of Christian eschatology, and of Christian pastoral care, was the fate of the *non valdes*—of the *non valde mali* and the *non valde boni:* the "not altogether bad" and the "not altogether good." Such persons could be helped by the prayers and offerings of the living, provided that they had "qualified" for such help in this life, by living reasonably good lives: "For there is a certain manner of living, neither good enough

to dispense with the need for those offerings after death, nor bad enough to preclude their being of advantage to them after death."[63]

The lapidary phrases of the *Enchiridion*—which laid out this three-fold division of the faithful—achieved an almost gnomic authority in later centuries. Like well-worn stones, they slid smoothly into place, again and again, in all subsequent discussions of the fate of the soul and the offerings made on its behalf by the faithful. They have been acclaimed as "the first step in the hierarchization of sins" that would lead, eventually, to the three-fold division of the other world into heaven and hell, with purgatory in the middle, that characterized the Catholic Christianity of the West.[64]

But to say this is to jump ahead too fast. For Augustine himself, we can sense, behind the rocklike opacity of his answer to Laurentius, nothing less than the building of a dam. This dam was intended to hold back (and not to satisfy) the mute pressure of the *non valdes*—of the "not altogethers" of the Christian communities. Like the catechumens who questioned Mani in the *Kephalaia,* average Christians in Africa and elsewhere wanted considerably more circumstantial and, if possible, more reassuring answers than Augustine was prepared to give them. They wanted a clear place for their loved ones in the geography of the other world. They wanted to know that the rituals that they performed on earth on behalf of the dead had a direct and positive influence on their fate. Augustine denied them that certainty. Yet the issue could not be avoided. The church was on its way to swallowing Roman society whole. This meant that it was well on its way to becoming a church of the *non valdes.*

It is for this reason that we begin our next chapter with the reticences of Augustine. We will examine his hesitations on the issue of the relations between the dead and the living in dreams and visions, on the fate of the soul after death, and on the effect on the souls of the departed of the rituals performed on their behalf by the living. These hesitations were a response to continuous questioning by clerical colleagues and laypersons. The questions that he had to answer reflected more than mere theological dilemmas, they were the sign of the turning of an age.

Augustine himself would play no small role in bringing about this turning of the age. By winning his battle with Pelagius, he left a deep mark on the piety of Latin Christendom, in ways that intimately affected attitudes toward death and toward the need of the soul for expiation both in this world and in the next. But the constant questioning to which he responded showed how little even he had been able to solve the problems connected with the other world. For he had, if anything, made them more acute. Like many old men in the moment of their triumph, he ended his life with his face set against a future that he himself had done so much to bring about.