Documents

Considering the Evidence: The Making of Christian Europe . . . and a Chinese Counterpoint

Like Buddhism, Christianity became a universal religion, taking root well beyond its place of origin. During the classical era, this new faith, born in a Jewish context in Roman Palestine, spread throughout the Roman Empire, where it received state support during the fourth century C.E. In the centuries that followed the collapse of the western Roman Empire, Christianity also took hold among the peoples of Western Europe in what are now England, France, Germany, and Scandinavia. While we often think about this region as solidly Christian, Western Europe in the period between 500 and 1000 C.E. was very much on the frontier of an expanding Christian world. During those centuries, a number of emerging monarchs of post-Roman Europe found the Christian faith and the Church useful in consolidating their new and fragile states by linking them to the legacy of the Roman Empire. Although the religion of Jesus ultimately became widely accepted, the making of Christian Europe was a prolonged and tentative process, filled with setbacks, resistance, and struggles among variant versions of the faith as well as growing acceptance and cultural compromise. An interesting counterpoint to the story of Christianity in Western Europe lies in its spread to China at about the same time. There, however, it did not take root in any permanent fashion, although it briefly generated a fascinating expression of the Christian faith.

Document 10.1

The Conversion of Clovis

Among the Germanic peoples of post-Roman Western Europe, none were of greater significance than the Franks, occupying the region of present-day France (see Map 10.1, p. 428). By the early sixth century, a more or less unified Frankish kingdom had emerged under the leadership of Clovis (reigned 485–511), whose Merovingian dynasty ruled the area until 751. Clovis's conversion to Christianity was described about a century later by a well-known bishop and writer, Gregory of Tours (538–594). It was an important step in the triumph

of Christianity over Frankish "paganism." It also marked the victory of what would later become Roman Catholicism, based on the idea of the Trinity, over a rival form of the Christian faith, known as Arianism, which held that Jesus was a created divine being subordinate to God the Father.

- According to Gregory, what led to the conversion of Clovis?
- What issues are evident in the religious discussions of Clovis and his wife, Clotilda?
- Notice how Gregory modeled his picture of Clovis on that of Constantine, the famous Roman emperor whose conversion to Christianity in the fourth century gave official legitimacy and state support to the faith (see Chapter 5). What message did Gregory seek to convey in making this implied comparison?
- How might a modern secular historian use this document to help explain the spread of Christianity among the Franks?

Gregory of Tours

History of the Franks

Late Sixth Century

[Clovis] had a first-born son by queen Clotilda, and as his wife wished to consecrate him in baptism, she tried unceasingly to persuade her husband, saying: "The gods you worship are nothing, and they will be unable to help themselves or any one else. For they are graven out of stone or wood or some metal.... They are endowed rather with the magic arts than with the power of the divine name. But he [God] ought rather to be worshipped who created by his word heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them is out of a state of nothingness... [and] by whose hand mankind was created...."

But though the queen said this, the spirit of the king was by no means moved to belief, and he said: "It was at the command of our gods that all things were created and came forth, and it is plain that your God has no power and, what is more, he is proven not to belong to the family of the gods." Meantime the faithful queen made her son ready for baptism; she gave command to adorn the church with hangings and curtains, in order that he who could not moved by persuasion might be urged to belief by this mystery. The boy, whom they named Ingomer, died after being baptized, still wearing the white garments in which he became regenerate. At this the king was violently angry, and reproached the queen harshly, saying: "If the boy had been dedicated in the name of my gods he would certainly have lived; but as it is, since he was baptized in the name of your God, he could not live at all." To this the queen said: "I give thanks to the omnipotent God, creator of all, who has judged me not wholly unworthy, that he should deign to take to his kingdom one born from my womb. My soul is not stricken with grief for his sake, because I know that, summoned from this world as he was in his baptismal garments, he will be fed by the vision of God...."

The queen did not cease to urge him to recognize the true God and cease worshipping idols. But he could not be influenced in any way to this belief,

Source: Gregory Bishop of Tours, *History of the Franks*, translated by Ernest Brehaut (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916; copyright renewed 1944), Book 2, selections from Sections 27, 29, 30, 31, 36–41.

until at last a war arose with the Alamanni,° in which he was driven by necessity to confess what before he had of his free will denied. It came about that as the two armies were fighting fiercely, there was much slaughter, and Clovis's army began to be in danger of destruction. He saw it and raised his eyes to heaven, and with remorse in his heart he burst into tears and cried: "Jesus Christ, whom Clotilda asserts to be the son of the living God..., I beseech the glory of thy aid, with the vow that if thou wilt grant me victory over these enemies..., I will believe in thee and be baptized in thy name. For I have invoked my own gods but, as I find, they have withdrawn from aiding me; and therefore I believe that they possess no power, since they do not help those who obey them...." And when he said thus, the Alamanni turned their backs, and began to disperse in flight. And when they saw that their king was killed, they submitted to the dominion of Clovis, saying: "Let not the people perish further, we pray; we are yours now." And he stopped the fighting, and after encouraging his men, retired in peace and told the queen how he had had merit to win the victory by calling on the name of Christ. This happened in the fifteenth year of his reign....

And so the king confessed all-powerful God in the Trinity, and was baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and was anointed with the holy ointment with the sign of the cross of Christ. And of his army more than 3,000 were baptized.

°**Alamanni:** a Germanic people.

Document 10.2

Advice on Dealing with "Pagans"

In their dealings with the "pagan," or non-Christian, peoples and kings of Western Europe, church authorities such as missionaries, bishops, and the pope himself sometimes advocated compromise with existing cultural traditions rather than overt hostility to them. Here Pope Gregory (reigned 590–604) urges the bishop of England to adopt a strategy of accommodation with the prevailing religious practices of the Anglo-Saxon peoples of the island. It was contained in a famous work about the early Christian history of England, composed by a Benedictine monk known as The Venerable Bede and completed about 731.

- What can we learn about the religious practices of the Anglo-Saxons from Bede's account?
- In what specific ways did the pope urge toleration? And why did he advocate accommodation or compromise with existing religious practices? Keep in mind that the political authorities in England at the time had not yet become thoroughly Christian.
- What implication might Gregory's policies have for the beliefs and practices of English converts?

Pope Gregory

Advice to the English Church

601

[T]he temples of the idols in that nation [England] ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove error from their hearts, and knowing and adoring the true God, may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed.

And because they have been used to slaughter many oxen in the sacrifices to devils, some solemnity must be exchanged for them on this account, as that on the day of the dedication, or the nativities of the holy martyrs, whose relics are there deposited, they may build themselves huts of the boughs of trees, about those churches which have been turned to that use from temples, and celebrate the solemnity with religious feasting, and no more offer beasts to the Devil, but kill cattle to the praise of God in their eating, and return thanks to the Giver of all things for their sustenance; to the end that, while some gratifications are outwardly permitted them, they may the more easily consent to the inward consolations of the grace of God. For there is no doubt that it is impossible to efface everything at once from their obdurate minds; because he who endeavors to ascend to the highest place, rises by degrees or steps, and not by leaps.

Thus the Lord made Himself known to the people of Israel in Egypt; and yet He allowed them the use of the sacrifices which they were wont to offer to the Devil, in his own worship; so as to command them in his sacrifice to kill beasts, to the end that, changing their hearts, they might lay aside one part of the sacrifice, while they retained another; that while they offered the same beasts which they were wont to offer, they should offer them to God, and not to idols; and thus they would no longer be the same sacrifices.

Source: The Venerable Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, edited by Ernest Rhys (London: J. M. Dent and Sons; New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1910), 52–53.

Document 10.3

Charlemagne and the Saxons

The policies of peaceful conversion and accommodation described in Document 10.2 did not prevail everywhere, as Charlemagne's dealings with the Saxons reveals. During late eighth and early ninth centuries C.E., Charlemagne (reigned 768–814) was the powerful king of the Franks. He turned his Frankish kingdom into a Christian empire that briefly incorporated much of continental Europe, and he was crowned as a renewed Roman emperor by the pope. In the course of almost constant wars of expansion, Charlemagne struggled for over thirty years (772–804) to subdue the Saxons, a "pagan" Germanic people who inhabited a region on the northeastern frontier of Charlemagne's growing empire (see Map 10.2, p. 436). The document known as the *Capitulary on Saxony* outlines a series of laws, regulations, and punish-

ments (known collectively as a capitulary) regarding religious practice of the Saxons. This document reveals both the coercive policies of Charlemagne and the vigorous resistance of the Saxons to their forcible incorporation into his Christian domain.

- What does this document reveal about the kind of resistance that the Saxons mounted against their enforced conversion?
- How did Charlemagne seek to counteract that resistance?
- What does this document suggest about Charlemagne's views of his duties as ruler?

CHARLEMAGNE

Capitulary on Saxony

785

1. It was pleasing to all that the churches of Christ, which are now being built in Saxony and consecrated to God, should not have less, but greater and more illustrious honor, than the fanes° of the idols had had....

3. If any one shall have entered a church by violence and shall have carried off anything in it by force or theft, or shall have burned the church itself, let him be punished by death.

4. If any one, out of contempt for Christianity, shall have despised the holy Lenten fast and shall have eaten flesh, let him be punished by death. But, nevertheless, let it be taken into consideration by a priest, lest perchance any one from necessity has been led to eat flesh.

5. If any one shall have killed a bishop or priest or deacon, let him likewise be punished capitally.

6. If any one deceived by the devil shall have believed, after the manner of the pagans, that any man or woman is a witch and eats men, and on this account shall have burned the person, or shall have given the person's flesh to others to eat, or shall have eaten it himself, let him be punished by a capital sentence.

7. If any one, in accordance with pagan rites, shall have caused the body of a dead man to be burned and shall have reduced his bones to ashes, let him be punished capitally....

9. If any one shall have sacrificed a man to the devil, and after the manner of the pagans shall have presented him as a victim to the demons, let him be punished by death.

10. If any one shall have formed a conspiracy with the pagans against the Christians, or shall have wished to join with them in opposition to the Christians, let him be punished by death; and whoever shall have consented to this same fraudulently against the king and the Christian people, let him be punished by death....

17. Likewise, in accordance with the mandate of God, we command that all shall give a tithe of their property and labor to the churches and priests;

18. That on the Lord's day no meetings and public judicial assemblages shall be held, unless perchance in a case of great necessity or when war compels it, but all shall go to the church to hear the word of God, and shall be free for prayers or good works. Likewise, also, on the especial festivals they shall devote themselves to God and to the services of the church, and shall refrain from secular assemblies.

°**fanes:** temples.

Source: D. C. Munro, trans., *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, vol. 6, no. 5, *Selections from the Laws of Charles the Great* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1900), 2–4.

19. Likewise, . . . all infants shall be baptized within a year. . . .

21. If any one shall have made a vow at springs or trees or groves, or shall have made any offerings after the manner of the heathen and shall have partaken of a repast in honor of the demons, if he shall be a noble, [he must pay a fine of] 60 solidi,° if a freeman 30, if a litus° 15.

°**solidi:** gold coins.

°**litus:** neither a slave nor a free person.

Documents 10.4 and 10.5

The Persistence of Tradition

Conversion to Christianity in Western Europe was neither easy nor simple. Peoples thought to have been solidly converted to the new faith continued to engage in earlier practices. Others blended older traditions with Christian rituals. The two documents that follow illustrate both patterns. Document 10.4 describes the encounter between Saint Boniface (672–754), a leading missionary to the Germans, and the Hessians during the eighth century. It was written by one of Boniface's devoted followers, Willibald, who subsequently composed a biography of the missionary. Document 10.5 comes from a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript known as the *Leechbook*, a medical text that describes cures for various problems caused by "elves and nightgoers."

- What practices of the Hessians conflicted with Boniface's understanding of Christianity? How did he confront the persistence of these practices?
- What do these documents reveal about the process of conversion to Christianity?
- How might Pope Gregory (Document 10.2), Charlemagne (Document 10.3), and Boniface (Document 10.4) have responded to the cures and preventions described in the *Leechbook*?

Willibald

Life of Boniface

ca. 760 C.E.

Now many of the Hessians who at that time had acknowledged the Catholic faith were confirmed by the grace of the Holy Spirit and received the laying-on of hands. But others, not yet strong in the spirit, refused to accept the pure teachings of the church in their entirety. Moreover, some continued secretly, others openly, to offer sacrifices to trees and springs, to inspect the entrails of victims; some practiced divination, legerdemain, and incantations; some turned their attention to auguries, auspices, and other sacrificial rites; while others, of a more

Source: Willibald, "Life of Boniface," in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, translated by C. H. Talbot (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 45–46.

reasonable character, forsook all the profane practices of the [heathens] and committed none of these crimes.

With the counsel and advice of the latter persons, Boniface in their presence attempted to cut down... a certain oak of extraordinary size, called in the old tongue of the pagans the Oak of Jupiter. Taking his courage in his hands (for a great crowd of pagans stood by watching and bitterly cursing in their hearts the enemy of the gods), he cut the first notch. But when he had made a superficial cut, suddenly, the oak's vast bulk, shaken by a mighty blast of wind from above crashed to the ground shivering its topmost branches into fragments in its fall. As if by the express will of God (for the brethren present had done nothing to cause it) the oak burst asunder into four parts, each part having a trunk of equal length.

At the sight of this extraordinary spectacle the heathens who had been cursing ceased to revile and began, on the contrary, to believe and bless the Lord. Thereupon the holy bishop took counsel with the brethren, built an oratory° from the timber of the oak and dedicated it to Saint Peter the Apostle. He then set out on a journey to Thuringia.... Arrived there, he addressed the elders and the chiefs of the people, calling on them to put aside their blind ignorance and to return to the Christian religion that they had formerly embraced.

°**oratory:** a place of prayer.

The Leechbook

Tenth Century

Work a salve against elfkind and nightgoers,... and the people with whom the Devil has intercourse. Take eowohumelan, wormwood, bishopwort, lupin, ashthroat, henbane, harewort, haransprecel, heathberry plants, cropleek, garlic, hedgerife grains, githrife, fennel. Put these herbs into one cup, set under the altar, sing over them nine masses; boil in butter and in sheep's grease, add much holy salt, strain through a cloth; throw the herbs in running water. If any evil temptation, or an elf or nightgoers, happen to a man, smear his forehead with this salve, and put on his eyes, and where his body is sore, and cense him [with incense], and sign [the cross] often. His condition will soon be better.

...Against elf disease...Take bishopwort, fennel, lupin, the lower part of *ælfthone*, and lichen from the holy sign of Christ [cross], and incense; a handful of each. Bind all the herbs in a cloth, dip in hallowed font water thrice. Let three masses be sung over it, one "Omnibus sanctis [For all the saints]," a second "Contra tribulationem [Against tribulation]," a third "Pro infirmis [For the sick]." Put then coals in a coal pan, and lay the herbs on it. Smoke the man with the herbs before... [9 A.M.] and at night; and sing a litany, the Creed [Nicene], and the Pater noster [Our Father]; and write on him Christ's mark on each limb. And take a little handful of the same kind of herbs, similarly sanctified, and boil in milk; drip holy water in it thrice. And let him sip it before his meal. It will soon be well with him.

Against the Devil and against madness,... a strong drink. Put in ale hassock, lupin roots, fennel, ontre, betony, hind heolothe, marche, rue, wormwood, nepeta (catmint), helenium, *ælfthone*, wolfs comb. Sing twelve masses over the drink; and let him drink. It will soon be well with him.

A drink against the Devil's temptations: thefanthorn, cropleek, lupin, ontre, bishopwort, fennel, hassock, betony. Sanctify these herbs; put into ale holy water. And let the drink be there in where the sick man is. And continually before he drinks sing thrice over the drink,... "God, in your name make me whole (save me)."

Source: Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 159–67.

Document 10.6

The Jesus Sutras in China

In 635 C.E. the Tang dynasty emperor Taizon welcomed a Persian Christian monk named Alopen and some two dozen of his associates to the Chinese capital of Chang'an (now Xian, see Map 5.1, p. 213). The Chinese court at this time was unusually open to a variety of foreign cultural traditions, including Buddhism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism in addition to Christianity. The version of Christianity that Alopen brought to China was known as Nestorianism (see p. 426). Regarded as heretics in the West and much persecuted, Nestorians had found refuge in Persia and from there introduced the faith into India, Mongolia, and China.

In sharp contrast to its success in Europe, Christianity did not establish a widespread or lasting presence in China. Isolation from the Persian heartland of Nestorian Christianity, opposition from Buddhists, and state persecution of all foreign religions in the ninth century reduced the Nestorian presence to near extinction. But for several centuries, under more favorable political conditions, a number of small Christian communities had flourished, generating a remarkable set of writings known as the "Jesus sutras." (A sutra is a Buddhist religious text.)

Some were carved on large stone slabs, while others were written on scrolls discovered early in the twentieth century in the caves of Dunhuang in northwestern China. What has fascinated scholars about these writings is the extent to which they cast the Christian message in distinctively Chinese terms, making use particularly of Buddhist and Daoist concepts long familiar in China. For example, at the top of a large stone tablet known as the Nestorian Monument is a Christian cross arising out of a white cloud (a characteristic Daoist symbol) and a lotus flower (an enduring Buddhist image). The written texts themselves, which refer to Christianity as the "Religion of Light from the West" or the "Luminous Religion," describe its arrival in China and outline its message within the framework of Chinese culture.

- What was the role of the emperor in establishing Christianity in China? How does this compare with the religious role of European monarchs such as Clovis or Charlemagne in Europe?
- How do the sutras depict the life, death, and teachings of Jesus?
- In what ways are Daoist or Buddhist concepts used to express the Christian message? (See pp. 195–97 and 199–201.)
- How does this Persian/Chinese version of Christianity differ from that of Catholic Europe?

The Jesus Sutras

635–1005

On the Coming of Christianity to China

The Emperor Taizong was a champion of culture. He created prosperity and encouraged illustrious sages to bestow their wisdom on the people....

In... 638 C.E., ... the Emperor issued a proclamation saying:

"There is no single name for the Way.

Sages do not come in a single form.

These Teachings embrace everyone and can be adopted in any land.

A Sage of great virtue, Aleben, has brought these scriptures... and offered them to us in the Capital.

We have studied these scriptures and found them otherwordly, profound and full of mystery....

These teachings will save all creatures and benefit mankind, and it is only proper that they be practiced throughout the world."

Following the Emperor's orders, the Greater Qin Monastery was built.... Twenty-one ordained monks of the Luminous Religion were allowed to live there....

Imperial officers were ordered to paint a portrait of the Emperor on the wall of the monastery.... This auspicious symbol of the imperial presence added brilliance and bestowed favor upon the religion....

The Luminous Religion spread throughout all ten provinces, the Empire prospered and peace prevailed. Temples were built in 100 cities and countless families received the blessings of the Luminous Religion.

On the Story of Jesus

The Lord of Heaven sent the Cool Wind to a girl named Mo Yen. It entered her womb and at that moment she conceived....

Mo Yen became pregnant and gave birth to a son named Jesus, whose father is the Cool Wind....

When Jesus Messiah was born, the world saw clear signs in heaven and earth. A new star that could be seen everywhere appeared in heaven above....

From the time the Messiah was 12 until he was 32 years old, he sought out people with bad karma and directed them to turn around and create good karma by following a wholesome path. After the Messiah had gathered 12 disciples, he concerned himself with the suffering of others. Those who had died were made to live. The blind were made to see. The deformed were healed and the sick were cured. The possessed were freed of their demons and the crippled were made to walk. People with all kinds of illnesses drew near to the Messiah to touch his ragged robe and be healed....

The scribes who drank liquor and ate meat and served other gods brought false testimony against him. They waited for an opportunity to kill him. But many people had come to have faith in his teaching and so the scribes could not kill the Messiah. Eventually these people, whose karma was unwholesome, formed a conspiracy against him....

When the Messiah was 32 years old, his enemies came before the Great King Pilate and accused him by saying, The Messiah has committed a capital offense. The Great King should condemn him....

For the sake of all living beings and to show us that a human life is as frail as a candle flame, the Messiah gave his body to these people of unwholesome karma. For the sake of the living in this world, he gave up his life....

On the Four Laws of Dharma

The first law is no desire. Your heart seeks one thing after another, creating a multitude of problems. You must not allow them to flare up.... Desire can sap wholesome energy from the four limbs and the body's openings, turning it into unwholesome

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Source: Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras* (New York: Random House, 2001), 62–65, 68–69, 80–83, 90, 91, 103, 106, 107, 115–19.

activity. This cuts us off from the roots of Peace and Joy. That is why you must practice the law of no desire.

The second law is no action. Doing things for mundane reasons is not part of your true being. You have to cast aside vain endeavors and avoid shallow experiences. Otherwise you are deceiving yourself.... We live our lives veering this way and that: We do things for the sake of progress and material gain, neglecting what is truly important and losing sight of the Way. That is why you must distance yourself from the material world and practice the law of no action.

The third law is no virtue. Don't try to find pleasure by making a name for yourself through good deeds. Practice instead universal loving kindness that is directed toward everyone. Never seek praise for what you do.... But do it without acclaim. This is the law of no virtue.

The fourth law is no truth. Don't be concerned with facts, forget about right and wrong, sinking or rising, winning or losing. Be like a mirror.... It reflects everything as it is, without judging. Those who have awakened to the Way, who have attained the mind of Peace and Joy, who can see all karmic conditions and who share their enlightenment with others, reflect the world like a mirror, leaving no trace of themselves.

On God, Humankind and the Sutras

Heaven and earth are the creation of the One God. The power and will of God pass like the wind over everything. His is not a body of flesh, but a divine consciousness, completely unseen to human eyes....

People can live only by dwelling in the living breath of God. Only in this way can they be at peace and realize their aspirations. From sunrise to sunset, they dwell in the living breath of God; every sight and thought is part of that breath. God provides a place for them filled with clarity and bliss and stillness. All the Buddhas are moved by this wind, which blows everywhere in the world. God resides permanently in this still, blissful place; no karma is done without God....

Do what you have to do here on earth and your actions will determine your place in the next world. We are not born to live forever in the world, but are here to plant wholesome seeds that will produce good fruit in the world beyond this one. Everyone who seeks the other world will attain it if they plant good seeds before departing....

Anyone who crosses the ocean must have a boat before taking on the wind and waves. But a broken boat won't reach the far shore. It is the Sutras of the Luminous Religion that enable us to cross the sea of birth and death to the other shore, a land fragrant with the treasured aroma of Peace and Joy.

Using the Evidence: The Making of Christian Europe . . . and a Chinese Counterpoint

1. **Describing cultural encounters:** Consider the spread of Christianity in Europe and China from the viewpoint of those seeking to introduce the new religion. What obstacles did they encounter? What strategies did they employ? What successes and failures did they experience?

2. **Describing cultural encounters . . . from another point of view:** Consider the same process from the viewpoint of new adherents to Christianity. What were the motives for or the advantages of conversion for both political elites and ordinary people? To what extent was it possible to combine prevailing practices and beliefs with the teachings of the new religion?
3. **Making comparisons:** How did the spread of Christianity to China differ from its introduction to Western Europe? How might you describe and explain the very different outcomes of those two processes?
4. **Defining a concept:** The notion of "conversion" often suggests a quite rapid and complete transformation of religious commitments based on sincere inner conviction. In what ways do these documents support or challenge this understanding of religious change?
5. **Noticing point of view and assessing credibility:** From what point of view is each of the documents written? Which statements in each document might historians find unreliable and which would they find most useful?

Visual Sources

Considering the Evidence: Reading Byzantine Icons

Within the world of Byzantine or Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the icon—a Greek word meaning image, likeness, or picture—came to have a prominent role in both public worship and private devotion. Since Christianity had emerged in a Roman world filled with images—statues of the emperor, busts of ancestors and famous authors, frescoes, and murals—it is hardly surprising that Christians felt a need to represent their faith in some concrete fashion. Icons fulfilled that need.

The creation of icons took off in earnest as Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century C.E. Usually painted by monks, icons depicted Jesus, the Virgin Mary, saints, scenes from biblical stories, church feasts, and more. To Byzantine believers, such images were "windows on heaven," an aid to worship that conveyed the very presence of God, bestowing divine grace on the world. They were also frequently associated with miracles, and on occasion people scraped paint off an icon, mixing it with water to produce a "holy medicine" that could remedy a variety of ailments. Icons also served a teaching function for a largely illiterate audience. As Pope Gregory II in the eighth century explained:

> What books are to those who can read, that is a picture to the ignorant who look at it; in a picture even the unlearned may see what example they should follow; in a picture they who know no letters may yet read. Hence, for Barbarians especially a picture takes the place of a book.[29]

Icons were deliberately created—or "written"—as flat, two-dimensional images, lacking the perspective of depth. This nonrepresentational, nonrealistic portrayal of human figures was intended to suggest another world and to evoke the mysteries of faith that believers would encounter as they knelt before the image, crossed themselves, and kissed it. The images themselves were full of religious symbolism. The posture of the body, the position of the hand, and the fold of the clothing were all rich with meaning: a saint touching his hand to his cheek conveyed sorrow; a halo surrounding the head of a human figure reflected divinity or sacredness. Likewise, colors were

symbolic: red stood for either love or the blood of martyrs; blue suggested faith, humility, or heaven; and purple indicated royalty. Those who painted icons were bound by strict traditions derived from the distant past. Lacking what we might consider "artistic freedom," they sought to faithfully replicate earlier models.

In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike, the artistic representation of God occasioned heated debates. After all, the Ten Commandments declared, "You shall not make for yourselves a graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above." Almost since the beginning of Christian art, an undercurrent of opposition had criticized efforts to represent the divine in artistic form. Between 726 and 843, Byzantine emperors took the offensive against the use of icons in worship, arguing that they too easily became "idols," distracting believers from the adoration of God himself. Some scholars suggest that this effort, known as iconoclasm (icon breaking), also reflected a concern of religious and political authorities in Byzantium about the growing power of monks, who both created icons and ardently supported their use in worship. It may also have owed something to a desire to avoid offending a rapidly expanding Islamic world, which itself largely prohibited the representation of the human form.[30] Icons were collected from both homes and churches and burned in public square. Thousands of monks fled, and active supporters of icon use were subject to severe punishment. Some critics accused the emperor of sympathy with Islam. But by 843 this controversy was resolved in favor of icon use, an event still commemorated every year in Orthodox churches as the Triumph of Orthodoxy. Thereafter, the creation and use of icons flourished in the Byzantine Empire and subsequently in Russia, where Eastern Christianity began to take root in the late tenth century.

The three icons reproduced here provide an opportunity for you to "read" these visual sources and to imagine what religious meaning they may have conveyed to the faithful of Byzantine Christianity.

Visual Source 10.1, among the oldest icons in existence, dates from the sixth century and survived the destruction of icons during the century of iconoclasm. In contrast to many images of the suffering Jesus on the cross, this icon belongs to a tradition of icon painting that depicts Jesus as Christ Pantokrator. *Pantokrator* derives from a Greek term translated as "Almighty," "Ruler of All," or "Sustainer of the World." Wearing a dark purple robe and surrounded by a halo of light, Jesus holds a copy of the gospels in his left hand. Notice that Jesus' right hand is raised in blessing with the three fingers together representing the trinity and the two remaining fingers symbolizing the dual nature of Christ, both human and divine. Many observers have suggested that this important theological statement of Christ's divine and human nature is also conveyed in the asymmetrical character of the image.

Visual Source 10.1 Christ Pantokrator (Ancient Art & Architecture Collection)

- What differences can you notice in the two sides of Christ's face? (Pay attention to the eyebrows, the irises and pupils, the hair, the mustache, and the cheeks. Notice also the difference in color between the face and the hands.)
- How does this image portray Jesus as an all-powerful ruler?
- How does this depiction of Jesus differ from others you may have seen?
- Which features of this image suggest Christ's humanity and which might portray his divinity?

Icons frequently portrayed important stories from the Bible, none of which was more significant than that of the nativity. Visual Source 10.2, from fifteenth-century Russia, graphically depicts the story of Jesus' birth for the faithful. The central person in the image is not Jesus but his mother, Mary, who in Orthodox theology was known as the God-bearer.

- Why do you think Mary is pictured as facing outward toward the viewer rather than focusing on her child?
- Notice the three rays from heaven, symbolizing the trinity—God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—represented by the three figures at the top. What other elements of the biblical story of Jesus' birth can you identify in the image?
- The figure in the bottom left is that of a contemplative and perhaps troubled Joseph, Mary's husband-to-be. What do you imagine that Joseph is thinking? Why might he be troubled?
- Facing Joseph is an elderly person, said by some to represent Satan and by others to be a shepherd comforting Joseph. What thinking might lie behind each of these interpretations?

Visual Source 10.2 The Nativity (Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library)

Visual Source 10.3 Ladder of Divine Ascent (Roger Wood/Corbis)

Visual Source 10.3 is a twelfth-century Byzantine painting intended to illustrate an instructional book for monks, written in the sixth century by Saint John Climacus. Both the book and the icon are known as the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Written by an ascetic monk with a reputation for great piety and wisdom, the book advised monks to renounce the world with its many temptations and vices and to ascend step by step toward union with God in heaven. The icon served as a visual illustration of that process. The monks are climbing the ladder of the spiritual journey toward God but are beset by winged demons representing various sins—lust, anger, and pride, for example—which are described in Climacus's book. Some have fallen off the ladder into the mouth of a dragon, which represents hell.

- How does this icon portray the spiritual journey?
- What sources of help are available for the monks on the ladder? Notice the figures in the upper left and lower right.
- What message might beginning monks have taken from this image?

Using the Evidence: Reading Byzantine Icons

1. **Viewing icons from opposing perspectives:** How might supporters and opponents of icons have responded to these visual sources?
2. **Identifying religious ideas in art:** What elements of religious thought or practice can you identify in these icons? In what ways were these religious ideas represented artistically?
3. **Comparing images of Jesus:** In what different ways is Jesus portrayed in the three icons? What similarities can you identify?
4. **Comparing religious art cross-culturally:** How might you compare these icons to the Buddha images in Chapter 5? Consider their purposes, their religious content, and their modes of artistic representation.

وكاد يزعزع الجمال الشمر وانشد

ما الحج سيرك تاويا واد لاجا ولا اعتياما جملا واحدا

الحج ان تقصد البيت الحرام على تحريد الحج لا تبغي به عاجا

وسطى كامل الانصاف متخذا ردع الهوى هاديا واخلق بها حاجا