CHAPTER **FOUR**

Rome and Foreign Cults[1]

THE logic of Christian eschatology, inherited and developed from Judaism, was bound ultimately to bring the primitive Church into conflict with the Roman authorities. Though the Christians might claim repeatedly that their kingdom was 'not of this world', the influence of the Danielic view of world-history was too strong to be ignored.2 Too many Christians of the first generations after the Crucifixion saw Rome as the embodiment of 'idolatry', and the power of the Empire as the power of Anti-Christ. Its overthrow would presage a Millennium anticipated in earthly terms and the martyr's death would contribute to this end. The question is not so much why were the Christians persecuted, but how it was that they escaped the rigours meted out to the Jews in 115–117 and 132–135. The answer may be clearer when we have looked at the problem from the Roman point of view. What were the religious ideas on which Roman policy was based? How far did toleration of the religions of conquered or client peoples extend? How much religious loyalty was expected of provincials, especially in the Greek-speaking provinces where Jewish (and Christian) influence was strongest? In this chapter we move over the familiar ground of Rome's policy towards foreign cults until the moment when Augustus steps into the shoes of the fallen Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties, and the 'imperator felix' becomes θεός.

Developments leading up to the establishment of the Imperial cult may be briefly told. The Roman Republic was famed for 'religio'. Both foreign observers and citizens testify to the pride felt by the Roman governing classes for their devotion towards their ancestral religion. To Polybius, writing in Rome in circa 150 B.C., religious devotion was the one outstanding mark of superiority which Rome possessed over the Greeks of his day. 'But the quality in which the Roman commonwealth is most distinctly superior', he writes, 'is, in my opinion, the nature of

their religious convictions. I believe that it is the very thing which among other peoples is an object of reproach, I mean superstition (δεισιδαιμονία), which maintains the cohesion of the Roman State.'[3] The contrast between the disintegration of Hellenistic religion and the strength of the Roman attachment to traditional beliefs was striking enough for comment. So too in Polybius' view, was the contrast between Roman probity and Greek corruption.4 Polybius was echoed a century later in a statement which Cicero put into the mouth of the Stoic, Balbus. 'Moreover, if we care to compare our national characteristics with those of foreign peoples, we shall find that, while in all other respects we are only the equal or inferiors of others, yet in the sense of religion, that is, reverence for the gods we are far superior' (De Natura Deorum, ii.3.8). Sallust (*Jugurtha*, 14.19) and later, Horace (*Odes* iii.6.5) were to repeat the same sentiments. To Vergil (*Aeneid* vi.791–807), Augustus ruled *because* he honoured the gods.

The emphasis lay on Cicero's final phrase, 'religione id est cultu deorum multo superiores'. There could be scepticism about particular gods and particular rites, but religio, representing the truths behind them, was inviolable. The gods in their totality were the guardians of Rome. Failure to give them their proper due, embodied in rites handed down from time immemorial, could bring disaster to Rome and her achievement. Thus Livy records how in 397 B.C., during the war against Veii, the Delphic oracle informed the embassy from Rome that a condition of success was the restoration of traditional cults in the old style.[5] During the same war, Livy put into the mouth of Camillus the warning to the Roman people 'that all went well so long as we obeyed the gods, and ill when we spurned them'.[6] When disaster did befall, as in the time of the great pestilence of 463 B.C., the remedy was a general sacrifice to the Roman gods by the whole people.' There were long-standing precedents for the action of the Emperor Decius in 250.

Religio was regarded in the nature of a contract. The word pax in pax *deorum* implied a treaty relationship. Right worship and due respect ensured that the gods did their work of protecting the Roman people. If the sacred chickens were thrown into the sea, it was not surprising that the battle was lost. There was little scope or need for intellectual justification for the existence of the gods.

It is interesting that Cicero's Balbus, despite his Stoicism, applauds the views of Cotta, a religious sceptic who was none the less Pontifex Maximus, in rejecting the arguments of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers for the existence of gods, as being subject to logical suspicion and therefore unacceptable as a basis of religious conduct.[8] Instead, the only basis Cotta can accept was that of tradition, the *mos maiorum*—and that was to be accepted without question.[9] Indeed, whether one looks at a surviving passage of Ennius,[10] or to the arguments of Symmachus in the Altar of Victory controversy six centuries later, the mos maiorum forms the continuous background to the Roman attitude towards religion. It included a whole nexus of ideas and practices, through which government, human relations, morality and justice were maintained. 'If we reject devotion towards the gods, good faith and all associations of human life and the best of virtues, justice, may also disappear.'[11] Religion and the preservation of the Roman state were intimately connected. If the Pontifex Maximus after 103 B.C. became a temporary and political appointment, the holder of the office while in power 'iudex et arbiter habetur *rerum* divinarum *humanarumque*'.[12] Constantine did not ask for more.

Roman religion was therefore less a matter of personal devotion than of national cult.[13] Rome judged the religion of others from the same standpoint. 'Every people, Laelius, has its religion, and we have ours.'[14] A religio was licita for a particular group on the basis of tribe or nationality and traditional practices, coupled with the proviso that its rites were not offensive to the Roman people or their gods. But, for Roman citizens, loyalty to the national religion precluded participation in the rites of others, unless these had been specifically sanctioned by the Senate. Thus, Cicero's well-known passage, 'Separatim nemo habessit deos neve novos neve advenas nisi *publice adscitos*'. Privately, people should worship those gods whose worship they had received from their ancestors.[15] The practice by a Roman citizen of an externa religio which had not been accepted could be an insult to the gods and an affront to the greatness of the Roman people. Just as a man would not be a citizen of two states so he could not accept two religions.[16] Not for nothing were *maiestas* and *sacrilegium* linked in the minds of Roman lawyers,[17] and the participation of individuals in a religio externa condemned. Christianity was certainly among the latter.

Opinions might differ whether it was a harmful ***superstitio*** or not. In itself, it called for no more special treatment at the outset than any other foreign cult in the city of Rome.

The problem before the senators and Roman provincial officials was how far harmonization between the Roman deities and those of conquered or allied peoples could be carried. At what point did ***religio externa*** become ***religio prava***? Indeed, this way of looking at religious problems continued from Republic to Empire and persisted in official documents even after nearly a century of official Christianity.[18] In practice, the distinction was often finely drawn. Thus, in the Celtic provinces it was quite possible to find Roman equivalents even for Teutates and Tanaris, while the Druids and their rites were extirpated.[19] In Africa we find that Baal-Hammon was acceptable under the name of Saturn and housed in classical-looking temples, while the human sacrifice connected with his worship in Punic sanctuaries was suppressed. Harmonization, however, was generally taken a long way. In Rome itself many of the Greek deities had been assimilated, probably as part of the Etruscan legacy during the fifth century B.C., and so too had some of the gods and goddesses of the Italic tribes, including Mars and Diana. By about 300 B.C. Aesculapius had been introduced from Epidaurus and his cult of healing esconced on an island in the Tiber. At first, these 'di novensides', or 'newly settled' deities may perhaps have been distinguished from the older 'di indigetes', i.e. Roman indigenous deities, but before long the distinction lost any practical effect.[20] In the crisis of the second Punic War, however, these gods were seen to be unable of their own power to stem Hannibal's onslaught. People began to abandon them in earnest. In Livy's words 'And now not only in secret, and within the walls of private houses were Roman rites abandoned, but in public places also, and in the Forum and on the Capitoline, there was a crowd of women who were following the custom of the fathers neither in their sacrifices nor in prayers to the gods'.[21] This was in 213 B.C., and not surprisingly in the subsequent crisis caused by Hasdrubal's arrival in Italy in 205–204 B.C., the Senate took the drastic step of introducing the cult and black stone fetish of the Phrygian Great Mother Cybele into the city. It was the first time that a native cult from outside of Greece or Italy had been introduced. The battle of the Metaurus was won.

Hasdrubal was slain and Hannibal defeated. By 191 B.C. Cybele had her sanctuary on the Palatine.

There was, however, an important qualification. The annual ceremonies in her honour were drastically curtailed.[22] Down to the reign of Claudius, Roman citizens were forbidden to take part in the disorderly processions and dances by Phrygian priests and their initiates.23 Instead, there were the more sedate *Megalesia* and *Ludi Megaleses*.[24] Though it was essential from the point of view of the efficacy of the rites that the ceremonies should be conducted as prescribed, and by Phrygian priests,[25] the Roman population must not be allowed to get out of hand. Religion must continue to be controlled by and serve the ruling aristocracy through the Senate.

This aim was from now onward, however, to be continuously challenged by events. The victorious wars and resulting political expansion of the Republic during the second century B.C. brought about an enormous increase in the population of the city of Rome. On the one hand, the city attracted impoverished country-folk from the land and ex-soldiers, and on the other, an increasing tide of immigrants from all over the Mediterranean. Many of these foreigners brought their gods with them. The process is quite clearly described by Livy writing in Augustus' reign. 'So much worship, and a great part of that foreign, penetrated the city, that both gods and men kept suddenly springing into existence . . . '.[26] The number of the *plebs* was increased by the agricultural population who had been driven into the city from fear and poverty, their fields being left untilled owing to the continuous wars. An inscription from Puteoli, though dated rather later, A.D. 79, gives an illustration of a god accompanying a group of Asiatic immigrants. 'The god Helios Sarapetos (i.e. Baal of Sarapt, located between Tyre and Sidon) came on ship from Tyre to Puteoli. Elim brought him according to command' (i.e. through a dream).[27] Two hundred years earlier, Isis was already established in Rome and she was only one of the host of oriental deities which flooded into the city in the second and first centuries B.C.

The problem of the foreign cults is, however, hardly intelligible without our bearing in mind the social implications of the great immigration. One result of this was that the lower classes in Rome became largely Greek-speaking. The immigrants tended to

settle down in great blocs, Asiatics on the Aventine, Jews and Phrygians across the Tiber in Trastevere and Africans on the Caelian. Here they formed their societies for worship and self-help, and these collegia attracted the adhesion of native Romans.[28] Rome became a vast melting-pot, whose denizens thought 'panem et circenses' not as a phrase but as a grim necessity of life. Neither the immigrants, nor their societies nor their gods were welcome to the ruling houses. In 65 B.C. there was a serious effort to purge the city of immigrants, but in vain. The use to which Clodius put the artisans' collegia a few years later was not forgotten, and among Caesar's measures of reconstruction in the city of Rome between 48–44 B.C. was their vigorous control.[29] Only bonajide associations of traders and licensed religious groups, such, significantly, as Jewish synagogues were permitted.30 It is interesting that *collegia* with specifically religious aims were claiming attention, for the Senate always feared that religious disorder could easily be transformed into social revolution. The Sicilian peasants revolt of 134 B.C. had been led by the servant of a Syrian goddess under the influence of religious frenzy, and his followers had bound themselves with solemn oaths and sacrifices.[31] As late as the reign of Commodus the Bucolic revolt in the Nile Delta was led by a priest and cannibalism in the name of religion was practised by the insurgents.32 Illegal *collegia* and clandestine rites were deeply rooted associations in the minds of the authorities.

The proof of the persistence of these fears in the early years of Augustus' reign is shown by Livy's long and detailed account of the Bacchanal conspiracy of 186 B.C. (xxxix.8–19).[33] The affair took place nearly 150 years before, but the ideas he expresses are those of his own day. The Bacchanalia were of Greek origin. They began, we are told, with a small association of women. The rites caught on, and under the leadership of a Campanian priestess degenerated into large-scale nocturnal orgies and even into secret murders and poisonings. Nobles were implicated, and eventually the scandal came out into the open. The Consul, Spurius Postumius Albinus, was asked by the Senate to investigate the affair extra *ordinem*.[34] His speech shows the fear for the safety of the State mingled with horror at the acts themselves which gripped the senators. The Bacchanalia were regarded primarily as a vast 'conspiracy' (coniuratio), whose aims included the firing of the

city and seizing control of the state, and whose leaders were drawn from the Romanplebs. The immediate safety of the senators and their families was considered to be in danger. An enormous number of people were involved, described by Livy in words which are reminiscent of a similar panic in A.D. 64.[35] 'Multitudinem ingentem, alterum iam prope populum esse.' Rome was gripped by panic. Postumius' opening words to the Senate showed how greatly the uncontrolled practice of foreign cults was feared, and the reasons.

> 'Never for any assembly', he began, 'has this formal prayer to the gods been not only so suitable, but even so necessary, a prayer which reminds us that these are the gods whom our forefathers had appointed to be worshipped, to be venerated, to receive our prayers, not those gods who drive our enthralled minds with vile and alien rites ... to every crime and every lust.'[36] 'Nothing', he went on, 'is more deceptive in appearance than a false religion (prava religio). When the authority of the gods is put forward as a defence for crime, there steals upon the mind the fear that lest in punishing human misdeeds we may violate something of divine law that became mixed up with them'[37] (tr. E. T. Sage).

Nothing endangered religion more than 'where sacrifices were performed not by native, but by foreign ritual'.[38] Nocturnal rites, orgies and secret murders, these were the signs of 'prava religio'. Such actions, the 'flagitia' accompanying the rites, endangered the community through the likelihood of black magic, they polluted the Roman gods and rendered the culprits liable to condign punishment.[39] A similar view was to be taken of the Christians by the Roman authorities of the generation of Tacitus and Pliny—theirs was also 'prava religio', accompanied by 'flagitia'.

Hence the reaction of the Senate is of considerable interest. Measures of defence and repression against the Bacchanals were taken through Senatorial decrees (senatus consulta). These were dispatched throughout the Italian provinces, and that addressed to the Taurani, a federated state of Bruttium, in the form of a bronze tablet, has survived to substantiate the general tenor of Livy's account.[40] If one may take the repression of the Christian community in Rome by Nero in 64 as a parallel, then the dispatch of a senatorial decree proscribing Christianity in Rome to some of the provinces cannot be ruled out of account entirely,

though the political and social circumstances behind the two crises were wholly different.[41]

The actual measures taken against the Bacchanals are also worth notice. Though more than 7000 individuals were eventually involved,[42] and (probably like the Christians in 64) 'more were killed than were thrown into prison',[43] the cult was not abolished altogether. Ancient Bacchic altars were spared. 'If any person considered such worship to be ordained by tradition (sollemne) or to be necessary', he could apply for permission to hold a ceremony to the city praetor, who would consult the senate on the matter.[44] But only five persons might be present at a sacrifice, and there must be no common chest or priest. The question seems to have been handled pragmatically by a mixture of decree and police regulation. Here was an admittedly ancient cult, and therefore offence to gods by its neglect might be incurred if it was abolished altogether; at the same time, its rites were offensive and destructive to social order. Therefore, their practice must be rendered harmless and confined to the narrowest limits. In 64, however, the Christians had no such claim to antiquity. Tacitus explained to his readers,[45] that they originated in Palestine in the reign of Tiberius, their leader had been executed by Pontius Pilate—and they were also noxious.

The Bacchanals survived the blow. They might remain the by-word for a dangerous and disorderly cult in both the Roman and Greek worlds for another two centuries,[46] and their repression by the Senate was praised by Cicero, but they did not die out. By A.D. 79 the rites had become 'respectable' enough to be the subject of wall-paintings at Pompeii, and in the second century A.D. the cult provided a popular theme on mosaics47 of the houses of the wealthy. They had received treatment which if most severe, was not regarded as exceptional.[48] For over two hundred years, between 150 B.C. and A.D. 69 the cult of Isis was the subject of a bewildering series of conflicting decisions.[49] In Sulla's time there was a collegium of Isiac pastophori, but as the Bacchanals before them, the cult became suspected of providing a cloak for immoralities, and came under the adverse notice of the Senate. In 58 B.C. it was excluded from the Capitol by the consuls of the year,[50] and other severer measures followed in 53, 50 and 48. But in 42 B.C. amidst the anarchy of the civil wars a temple of Isis was built by

the triumvirs; and from now on, the cult though not formally recognized, was tolerated in Rome. Augustus, however, once more ordered its removal from the *pomerium*; its adherents were expelled from Rome by senatorial decree in A.D. 19 on moral grounds, in the same order as that expelling the Jews,[51] but it never lost its popularity especially among women.[52] By Nero's reign there must have been a shrine to the goddess on the Capitol. By the early third century it had become completely naturalized. The story of Isis in Rome is thus the story of the gradual penetration and acceptance of a foreign cult despite opposition and despite periodic repression including the execution of its priests as criminals.

Other groups suffered similarly. The Chaldaean soothsayers and horoscopists ***(mathematici)*** were the object of malevolent suspicion throughout the period of the Empire, whether in the reign of Tiberius or Valentinian I. They were expelled by senatorial decree in Tiberius' reign, and on five other occasions in the first century A.D. their expulsion was ordered. They too survived. Yet by the mid–second century Chaldaean oracles were highly regarded, and the Chaldaeans themselves were being quoted by Celsus as 'a race endowed with the highest inspiration from the beginning', and an example of the veracity of pagan prophecy.[53] The Druids in both Britain and Gaul were crushed with similar severity. In their case the objections were that their rites were abhorrent and that they encouraged anti-Roman sentiment. Thus, Pliny the Elder—'it cannot be estimated what a debt is owed to the Romans who have done away with these monstrous rites (in Gaul and Britain), in which it was counted the height of religion to kill a man and a most healthful thing to eat him'.[54] Strabo adds that 'they (the Druids) committed acts that are contrary to what is permitted among us and that in consequence the Romans stopped their sacrifices and divinations.55 Christians were not the only sectaries who incurred the suspicion of cannibalism, and therefore brought down on themselves the wrath of the authorities.

The same policy may be traced with regard to the penetration of Hellenistic philosophies in the capital. The religious practices of Rome were never to develop far beyond what had been suitable for an agricultural people. As a guide to personal life they ceased to hold either the educated classes or the population as a whole.

If it had not been for the over-riding force of ancestral tradition the Roman gods might have passed into oblivion through neglect as Varro thought in the years before the Principate.[56] Their place, as is well known, had been taken by Stoicism and Epicureanism.[57]

Again, the test of acceptability appears to have been not the teaching itself but its effect on morality. To be sure, 'arguments against the gods' were regarded as 'mala consuetudo', in the sense of being bad manners and a mark of barbarism,[58] but when the Epicureans were expelled from Rome in 175 B.C. it was on the grounds that their teaching encouraged illicit pleasures.[59] Stoicism, it need hardly be stated, became something in the nature of the religion of the Roman upper classes. It dominates the outlook of many of their best minds from the time of Scipio Africanus Minor to that of Marcus Aurelius.[60] The brushes between the Stoics and Domitian were on political grounds—once more, the practical effect of their teaching on the attitude of leading citizens towards the government. Rome had no Socrates, and no cause *célèbre* against 'atheism'. Indeed, the abstract term 'atheus' never became properly acclimatized into Latin.[61]

To sum up, Roman religion like the religion of the peoples Rome conquered was one of acts based on ancestral usage. The complex of ideas defined in such phrases as 'disciplina publica', 'mores nostri', or 'leges veteres', formed a barrier against the foreign cults, and equally against Judaism and Christianity. Except in dire emergencies, acceptance by the Senate took a long time, and even then, the cult might not be recognized within the pomerium of the city of Rome. Until recognition was granted conversion to a foreign cult by a Roman citizen which involved neglect of the traditional Roman cult could be punishable, but was not often so. There seems little reason to doubt that the formal grounds for the execution of Acilius Glabrio and Flavius Clemens by Dornitian in 95 was suspected conversion to some form of Judaism. That the prohibition could be extended to the wives of Roman nobles is demonstrated both by the punishment of women involved in the Bacchanalian affair, and in A.D. 57 by the case of Pomponia Graecina. In this case, the charge was adhesion to 'foreign religion', and the description of the suspicious symptoms suggests Judaism.[62] Christianity, therefore, when it appeared on the scene in Rome, perhaps a decade before the trial

of Pomponia Graecina, cannot be regarded as having presented the authorities with a problem for which there were no precedents.

To the traditional policy of wariness towards foreign cults and associations must now be added factors resulting from the religious change brought about by Augustan principate. It would seem that what came to be the divinization of the Emperor was the result of the intermingling of Greek ideas of kingship with the existing Roman identification of high office-holders with the protecting gods of the city.[63] One may point, for instance, to the customary identification of a victorious general during his Triumph with Jupiter, to the sacred character and personal inviolability of the Tribune, to the super-human concepts connected with an official's *auctoritas*,[64] and the tendency of leaders from Sulla onwards to claim for themselves something more than ordinary human qualities. To these influences were added the profound awe felt in the Greek cities at the unexampled rise of Roman power. Two years after Flamininus' triumph in 197 B.C. the 'goddess Rome' was being worshipped in Smyrna; and other cities of Asia followed suit.[65] At the end of the Republican period many of the Greeks were prepared to attribute divine powers as restorers of peace and harmony to the world, hitherto reserved for the successors of Alexander, to successful and flamboyant Roman generals.[66] When in 48 Caesar built a Caesareum at Alexandria dedicated to the worship of his own divinity and followed this up in the next year with one at Antioch he was merely accepting a role which had long been known in these areas.[67]

Meantime, matters had begun to move in the same direction in Rome itself. Caesar's toying with the title rex and the appearance of his head on the coinage, circled with the bay-wreath of Apollo and wearing the insignia of the Pontifex Maximus, suggest pretensions similar to those of the Hellenistic kings he had perhaps envied and admired during his stay in the East.[68] The events following his murder showed how threadbare the Republican tradition had become. The dead Caesar was accorded the title of *Divus*, the month of July was dedicated to him, and the Senate voted his Consecratio. His worship was associated with that of Dea Roma, and his genius was admitted to the Pantheon. It is difficult not to see in these measures a decisive break with the past,

and the preparation for the institution of the Imperial cult under Caesar's adopted heir, his grand-nephew, Octavian.

Both aspects of the renewal of Roman religion under Augustus were to have an effect on the future attitude of Rome towards Christianity. First, Roman religion became associated finally with the imperial mission of Rome, with the peace and order that she brought, and the eternity of her sway.[69] The Augustan age was looked upon almost as a Messianic age, the fulfilment in material terms of the secular hopes of mankind.[70] Against the obvious benefits brought by Augustus, what were the claims of the Zealot Leader crucified in 33 outside the walls of Jerusalem?[71] Secondly, in the Greek-speaking provinces the Imperial cult, both in its form and the vocabulary associated with its organization and practice, could become the rallying point to all who hated Judaism in shape or form, and in their hearts had 'no king but Caesar'.

The myth of Actium, as Syme has shown,[72] was religious as well as national. On the one side stood Rome and all the protecting gods of Italy, on the other, the bestial divinities of the Nile. If the Roman people were to be strong and confident in their future, honour must be done to the gods of Rome. Their dignified and reverent worship was the moral buttress of Rome's continuing power. The qualities of *virtus* and *pietas* could not be dissociated. Thus there begins a period of self-assertiveness in Roman paganism, patriotic as well as religious. It was not that there was active proselytization on behalf of the Roman gods, but these became the symbols of Empire, of the culture and language of Rome. Augustus himself was both superstitious and a statesman, and he actively furthered the revival of the ancestral Roman cults. He set an example which other emperors were to follow.[73] Livy's description (before 20 B.C.) of him as 'templorum omnium conditor aut restitutor' (iv.20.7), is borne out in fact. Eighty-two temples were restored or rebuilt. The Arval Brotherhood was resuscitated, the Secular Games held. 'By the enactment of new laws I restored many traditions of our ancestors which were passing out of use', wrote Augustus of his policy.[74] On Lepidus' death in 13 B.C., he assumed the office of Pontifex Maximus. And as if to show the practical import of these ideas, adultery was converted from a private offence into a public crime.[75] *Romanitas*

and stern moral principles were to be associated for the next three centuries—as both Decius and Diocletian were to demonstrate.

Meantime, a wave of relief and gratitude had been sweeping over the Greco-Roman world. For twenty years the Mediterranean from Italy eastwards had been the prey to continuous insecurity. The civil wars between Caesar and Pompey had been followed by Caesar's murder, and yet more war and threat of war. Vergil's lament in I Georgic written *circa* 33 B.C., 'For here, right and wrong are confounded. So many wars the world over; so many forms of wrong. No worthy honour is left to the plough; the husbandmen have been marched away. Our lands lie waste and the crooked pruning hooks have become stiff swords.'[76] He expressed the views of many. Then, with Actium, all was decided. The temple of Janus was closed for the first time in 29 B.C.[77] People saw Augustus as bringing order where disorder had previously reigned: as Zeus had overthrown the Titans. From 28 B.C. onwards the theme of *Pax* associated with Augustus appears on the coins of Alexandria and some Greek cities78 representing the restoration of harmony between the gods and humanity. In 30 B.C., the Proconsul of Asia, Paullus Fabius Maximus, gave the Greek cities of his province the advice that there could be no better day with which to begin the year than Augustus' birthday (23 September), and in their decrees which accepted the Julian calendar and recorded the acceptance of this view, they thanked Providence (πρόνοια) for producing Augustus as the bringer of peace and as the ruler who cared constantly for the welfare of all his subjects.[79] On the Cyrene inscription, Augustus himself takes up this cue, declaring that 'it will be plain to all who inhabit the provinces how much care I and the Senate take that none of our subjects suffer wrong or extortion'.[80] The *Providentia* Augusti guaranteed justice and peace to the provincials and the eternity of Rome itself.

What of the role of Augustus himself?[81] One looks for the clue in the profoundly conservative character of the man and in the fact that the principate was not intended as a complete break from what had gone before. Thus, to quote his own opinion of his office, 'I refused to accept the award of any form of office which was not in accordance with the institutions of our ancestors'.[82] This applied with no little force to matters of religion. The terse

epigrammatic comment by Suetonius reads, 'He treated with great respect such foreign rites as were ancient, and well established, but held the rest in contempt'.[83] In this case, the foreign rites included Judaism which he treated with marked favour both in Rome and the East, but it would hardly have extended to an off-shoot suspected of incendiarism and worse. For anything outlandish or dangerous, Dio Cassius provides confirmation to Suetonius' statement. 'Those who attempt to distort our religion with strange rites you should abhor and punish not merely for the sake of the gods (for if a man despises these he will not pay honour to any other being), but because such men by bringing in new divinities in the place of old, persuade many to adopt foreign practices from which spring up conspiracies, factions and cabals which are not profitable to a monarchy. Do not therefore permit anyone to be an atheist or a sorcerer.'[84] Even though written in the reign of Alexander Severus (222–235), these sentences, put into the mouth of Maecenas, may reflect the outlook of Augustus' court, for the similarity to Livy's views regarding the Bacchanalia is striking. In the minds of both writers, externa *religio* involved the suspicion of black magic and conspiracy against the state. It was therefore not to be tolerated until exhaustively tested—and Christianity had no black stone of Cybele to offer.

Augustus' own position in the religion of his subjects was the result not of megalomania such as drove Antiochus IV and Caligula to claim divine honours, but of a personal pre-eminence which resulted in a combination of titles being bestowed on him by grateful subjects.[85] Again, to quote the Res Gestae,

> I received the title of Augustus by decree of the Senate, and the door-posts of my house were officially covered with laurels: a civic crown was put over my door, and a golden shield was placed in the new Senate-House with an inscription recording that it was a gift to me from the Senate and the Roman people in recognition of my valour, my clemency, my justice and fulfilment of duty (pietas). After that I took precedence over all others in dignity, but I enjoyed no greater power than those who were my colleagues in the magistracy'[86] (E. Barker's translation, Alexander to Constantine, **229).**

Augustus himself refused to be anything other than 'princeps senatus'. He was not dictator and rejected the regal title of *dominus.*

He allowed his hand to be forced. But as Dio pointed out, the title Augustus raised its holder to something higher than an ordinary being.[87] The word belonged to the sacred language of the priests,[88] and in practice Augustus was surrounded with such abundance of religious honour 'that many people thought there was nothing left for the worship of the heavenly gods'.[89] Moreover, the libation of wine offered to his genius at all private and public functions suggested the closest association between the guiding spirit of the ruler and the world of gods. The same impression was given by the appearance of the bay-leaves of Apollo on his head on his coinage, as it had previously been on that of Caesar's.[90] Though he did not regard himself as Apollo incarnate, or descended from the god, he believed that he was under Apollo's special protection.[91]

This 'special relationship' with the gods symbolized for citizen and subject alike in the cult of the Emperor's genius, was to be of immense importance for the relations between the Empire and the Christians. In a veiled form, as Miss L. R. Taylor points out,[92] it was a worship of the Emperor himself, for the genius was rather more than the 'guardian spirit': it could be regarded as something in the nature of the essence, the energizing and life-giving power, the divine force which would secure the future of the Imperial House. For instance, on the coins of Augustus struck before 27 one can see on the obverse Octavian's portrait, on the reverse, a phallic figure with inscription Imp. *Caes.*[93] The chief festival of the cult was naturally the Emperor's birthday, and victims were offered to it on this day. However, it was at least partially rooted in native Roman precedent for it was customary to make a bloodless sacrifice to the Genius of a household—unmixed wine, such as was poured in the libation to the Emperor, incense and flowers. In the new cult the sacrifice of an ox, proper for sacrifice to Jupiter and most of the gods was offered. The libation to the Imperial genius became the token of loyalty to the Imperial house and perhaps even more important than this, the formula of veracity in official matters.[94] If challenged, however, Christians were unable to take this oath.[95] The Jews could and did offer prayer and sacrifice in the Temple on behalf of Augustus and his successors. This was accepted, and its refusal in *66* was regarded as the sign of their open revolt against Rome.[96] After the fall of

Jerusalem the Christians had no obvious centre at which to perform any similar act of collective loyalty, even if they had been acknowledged as a friendly national cult and encouraged to do so. In fact, their outlook in this regard, among others, approximated more to that of the Essenes who refused any religious acknowledgment of Caesar than to orthodox Jews. Though in the third century Origen (Contra *Celsum*, viii.75) spoke of a service of prayer rendered by Christians to the Empire, there was never an attempt to meet the customary requirements of loyalty.

The cult of the Imperial genius, provided a bridge between the Roman concept of the dignity and authority of Augustus and the Hellenistic concept of the divine kingship. It united the hitherto mutually dissenting halves of the Classical world. Moreover, the confederations of cities which grew up in the major provinces in both halves of the Empire to do honour to the Imperial genius provided a religious basis of loyalty to the Empire from which the Christians excluded themselves.

In the provinces, including Italy itself, the subtle distinctions between 'divine genius' and 'deity' were, however, blurred from the outset. In Egypt, of course, which Augustus regarded as his private domain, the Emperor was a god as the Pharaohs and Ptolemies had been before him. Immediately after the fall of Alexandria (1 August 30 B.C.) he was being invoked in declarations made by artisans, such as temple lamplighters at Oxyrhynchos, as 'god from god' (θεοῦ ἐκ θεοῦ)[97] and identified with Zeus Eleutheros Sebastos.[98] An inscription from the temple at Soknopoe Nesos (Fayum) set up in 25–24 B.C. hails him in the same terms.[99] In Asia Minor and Syria, the same thing was happening. As early as 33 B.C. the oath of fidelity taken by the Paphlagonians at Gangra promising to be faithful to Caesar–Augustus and his family was by 'Zeus, Terra, Sol and all the goddesses' and by Augustus himself.[100] All over the Greek world altars were being erected to Augustus.[101] In the great decree of the province of Asia which adopted the Julian calendar in his honour he is also referred to as 'the god whose birthday was the beginning of the good news (τῶν εὐαγγελ'ίων)[102] for the world that has come to men through him'. 'Good fortune' regarding 'salvation' began for the Greeks of Asia on his birthday. The language of the decree—in the use of words such as evangelion and soteria—anticipates the

language of the Gospels preached in those same cities half a century or so later.[103] Though the similarities were accidental, they could not have passed unnoticed, as the gleaming white marble and splendid carving of this and other inscriptions in honour of Augustus were there for all to read on the walls of the agora of the main cities of Asia.[104] In addition, first Nicomedia, capital of Bithynia, then Ephesus and Pergamum sought for and were granted permission to dedicate sacred precincts to dea *Roma*, to Caesar his father, whom he named the hero Julius, 'and to consecrate precincts to himself'.[105] Finally, the provincial councils of Galatia and Asia established a cult of Augustus. The statue of the Emperor was later set up in the precincts of the temple of the tutelary deity of the province—'Diana of the Ephesians', and henceforth Imperial and provincial deities were to be united in a single worship.[106]

In Syria, the restoration of 'peace with honour' on the Parthian frontier after 20 B.C., brought forth further paeans of praise. In the West, honour to Augustus took a more restrained form but an 'ara pacis' was probably erected in the capital city of each province, in imitation of that at Rome, and the enthusiasm for the successes of the reign was echoed on the provincial coinage. Though Dio Cassius, commenting on the establishment of the Imperial cult in Asia Minor, claims that no one dared to do likewise in Rome and Italy, a closer look at some of the Italian provincial inscriptions suggests that few of those who honoured the altars of the 'pater patriae', imagined that they were doing other than honouring a god.[107]

In the Greek-speaking provinces, however, enthusiasm for Augustus the 'divine father of his country' was to have more far-reaching effects. Rome and the Hellenistic world had at last found a basis for a genuine association. But, at the same time, the Imperial cult brought Rome face to face with the internecine religious struggles of the Greek East. The pride and self-confidence of the Augustan messianism was to be challenged by an equally strong messianism derived from among her subject peoples. The pragmatic, rule of thumb methods adequate to control noxious foreign cults in the capital were to find themselves tested to the uttermost by new and unfamiliar situations in the religious life of the eastern provinces of Augustus' empire.