

THE RISE OF CONFESSIONAL STATES

The present chapter begins with one of the major turning points in world history – not just Western history – namely, the emergence of confessional states and empires. Christian Rome in Late Antiquity was the first of these. From the time of Constantine, the Roman Empire granted unprecedented favor to a single dogmatic religion. By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had become the only religion that was legally recognized in the empire. The idea that a state can have only one religion was to become an unquestioned principle of Western governments down to the early modern period. In the Islamic world, which imitated Christendom in this respect, that principle remains widely recognized to this day.

The fundamental idea of Christendom as used in this book is of an empire or group of states in which orthodox Christianity is the official creed and where those who reject that creed are rooted out and punished as apostates and heretics or reduced (like the Jews) to an inferior civil status. At their worst, confessional states exercise a destructive ideological tyranny; at their most civilized, they allow a degree of pluralism and cultivate traditions that can be shared by all while privileging an established religion. The justification for Western confessional states is that the Christian faith is the main (or even exclusive) path to salvation and that the political authorities, given their general responsibility for the welfare of citizens, have a responsibility to guide them onto that path. Those who, from within or without, would threaten the eternal salvation of the people must be prevented from doing so. Those who would blaspheme against God or sacred things, for instance, must be punished. This justification licenses far greater state involvement in the beliefs and daily behavior of ordinary people than was found in classical Greco-Roman polities, where the main religious duty of ruling elites was to secure the favor of the gods through maintaining public cults and rituals.

The Christian confessional states thus found the Old Testament's model of rule – what Josephus called theocracy – far more serviceable than the political quietism of the New. Given the inferior status and intermittent persecution of Jews in Christendom, this seems at first sight a paradox: that Christian states

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FIGURE 6.1. *The Donation of Constantine*, workshop of Raphael, 1520.

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FIGURE 6.2. Mosaic from the Apse of the Church of Sant'Ambrogio, Milan, detail, fifth–eighth centuries.

A mosaic depicting Christ the King, famous martyrs of the Milanese Church, and episodes in the life of St. Ambrose, with lettering in both Greek and Latin.

would identify symbolically with ancient Israel, above all the kingdom of David and Solomon, and build their grand strategy, their vision for a collective future, upon the eschatology of the book of Daniel. To give but one famous example, when the emperor Justinian finished constructing the greatest architectural monument of early Christendom, the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople, he is said to have exclaimed, "O Solomon, I have vanquished thee!" He had created a monument that matched and exceeded the grandeur of Solomon's Temple. But this attitude becomes comprehensible in view of the theological doctrine known as supersessionism. As first proclaimed by the apostle Paul, Christian believers constituted a new people, transcending ethnicity, who through the new covenant of Jesus Christ had taken the place of ethnic Jews as God's Chosen People. The universal Church was henceforward the True Israel, and all non-Christians were "Gentiles," peoples presently disfavored by God but destined to be converted to the true faith.

ZECHARIAH 2:11

Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people.'

Christian Rome was the first confessional state, but it would not be the last. This form of political authority, where acceptance of a single set of religious beliefs and participation in the cult of a single religion is required for full membership in the community, ultimately became dominant in central and western Eurasia. By contrast, the Sassanian Persian Empire, though it had an elite religion, Zoroastrianism, never tried to force it on the whole population, and many religions were practiced among that empire's peoples, including an oriental branch of Christianity. The Hindu civilization of South Asia held on to a vigorous form of religious life that bore structural similarities to the polytheism of classical Greece and Rome. Imperial China had an elite culture, Confucianism, which was sustained by public and private religious rituals, but for the most part it did not attempt to limit the practice of other religions, including Daoism, Buddhism, oriental Christianity, and Islam, so long as these did not threaten the authority of the imperial government.

In the medieval and early modern periods, Islamic confessional states led by sultans – sovereign rulers who combined political, military, and religious authority – began to spread into India and down into Southeast Asia. Missions



The themes of Michelangelo's famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican palace (1508–12) were God's Creation, the Fall of Man, and the failure of patriarchal rule, which brought about the need for human government and law. Beneath this central narrative, Michelangelo arranged a series of Old Testament prophets and pagan sibyls. The latter were females who mediated the oracular wisdom of the pagan gods at shrines around the Mediterranean world. In this way, the great painter symbolized the twin sources of Christian wisdom: the ancient theology of the Greeks, preserved in the Platonic tradition, and the Law of the Hebrews, preserved in the Old Testament. Both sources, according to Eusebius's *Preparation for the Gospel* (after AD 313), contained prophecies of the coming of Christ.



LEFT:

FIGURE 6.3. The Prophet Zachariah (or Zechariah), Michelangelo, 1508–12. The Old Testament prophet Zachariah, who flourished just before the Second Temple period, is the eleventh of the twelve minor prophets. He prophesized the restoration of Judah and Zion and also the coming of a future Davidic king who would acknowledge God's universal sovereignty.

RIGHT:

FIGURE 6.4. The Delphic Oracle, Michelangelo, 1508–12. On the opposite side of the chapel from Zachariah is the Pythian Sibyl, who was the high priestess of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi and who, in a state of divine possession, mediated the Delphic Oracle. It was she who famously pronounced Socrates to be the wisest man in the world. The emperor Diocletian was said to have consulted the Delphic Oracle, which informed him that the Christian sect would destroy the Roman Empire.



ABOVE LEFT:

FIGURE 6.5. Pilot 1st Class Badge, Royal Thai Army, 1979–present. The Great Crown of Victory symbolizes the divine monarchy, and the symbol for Aum stands for the *sangha*, the Buddhist community of monks.

ABOVE RIGHT:

FIGURE 6.6. Union Jack, 1606–1800. The British flag, adopted by King James I, first king of both England and Scotland, shows the upright Cross of St. George, the patron saint of England, superimposed on the Cross of St. Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland. According to his legend, St. Andrew, when condemned to martyrdom, asked to be crucified on an X-shaped cross, feeling unworthy of being executed on the same type of cross upon which Jesus had been hung.



LEFT:

FIGURE 6.7. Ottoman Order of the Medjidie, instituted 1851. The star and crescent are symbols of Islam.

led by merchants eventually were followed by armies of the prophet. Holy war begets holy war, and Islam's military success hardened the loose thassalocracies of the latter region into Buddhist kingships, in what are today the countries of Bhutan, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia. These countries also acquired many characteristics of confessional states, using the Buddhist religion as their "social glue" and its symbols on the banners under which their armies fought. West Eurasian states after the Protestant Reformation also remained confessional states for centuries. The first major states of the West without established churches were the multiconfessional federal states of the Netherlands and the United States of America.*

The early Islamic caliphs, who acquired overwhelming political and military

* Minor and temporary exceptions proved the rule, such as the East Hungarian kingdom: the shifting religious loyalties of its monarch John II Zápolya were reflected in the Treaty of Torda (1568), by which a range of Protestant sects – though not, of course, Eastern Orthodoxy or Islam – were tolerated.

power in the seventh century, conquered Roman Syria and Palestine, destroyed the Persian Empire, and drove the Roman Empire from the southern Mediterranean and much of the Iberian Peninsula. Its armies of *mujahideen*, men committed to *jihad*, continued to threaten Christendom for a thousand years. Eventually, Islam built a great civilization, incorporating elements from Greek philosophy, Roman and Jewish law, Indian science and mathematics, and Persian government. There were long periods of fruitful cultural and economic exchange between Christendom and *dar al-Islam* – the part of the world submissive to Allah – but it was the military rivalry between Christian and Islamic states, the sword versus the scimitar, that above all came to define the political identity of Christendom. It was precisely when the Islamic threat to Europe began to fade, in the late seventeenth century, that the idea of the confessional state also lost its appeal in the West.

For the first three centuries of its existence, however, in the period known to historians today as Late Antiquity – from Diocletian's New Rome to the Islamic



MAP 6.1. The Spread of Islam across the World at the Beginning of the Middle Age, 622–750. The armies of the Prophet conquered two-thirds of the landmass of the old Justinianic Roman Empire and the entirety of the Sassanid Persian Empire.

conquests – the Roman confessional state established its Christian identity in contradistinction not to Islam but to “Gentile” or “pagan” Romans. These two expressions referred to Romans who tried to preserve traditional mores, settled ways of life, polytheistic religion, reverence for ancestors, and pride in the historical achievements of Rome. The word *pagani*, originally meaning “country-folk,” came in the mid-fourth century to mean (as the classicist Alan Cameron has argued) something like “outsider,” or simply “non-Christian,” a Latin equivalent to the Christian Greek word *hellenès* in the sense of polytheists or pagans. In the pre-Christian world, the Romans had successfully assimilated most foreign religious cults into their civilization, but not the Christian churches, which refused to succumb to the Romans’ worldly ways. Indeed, to Christians, the expression “the world” signified a hostile jungle full of temptations to evil and demon worship. In the book of Revelation (17:9), the city on seven hills is demonized as the Whore of Babylon.

The Christian cultural revolution eventually swept through Late Antique Rome because Christians persuaded enough of their contemporaries to see the old Greco-Roman culture as morally repulsive and theologically primitive. The Great Persecution, which made a spectacle of the injustice, greed, and cruelty of the old empire, was a pivotal moment. The generosity of the churches, the astonishing bravery of the martyrs under torture, and the holiness of Christianity’s saints, who lived as though they belonged to a different world, doubtless impressed a great many Romans. Christians condemned the pagan world for its addiction to violence and war; its casual cruelty and stonehearted labor regimes; its insatiable thirst for wealth and contempt for the poor; its toleration of marital infidelity, divorce, and the sexual exploitation of the weak. The Christians of the period saw traditional Romans as “men who walked backward,” superstitious idolators following a shameful, outworn, dying way of life. They saw themselves as bearers of a transcendent faith that was going to change the old world for the better and prepare it for the *parousia*, the second coming of Christ in glory, when he would establish his kingdom.

NEW ROME

After Constantine converted to Christianity following his victory at the Milvian Bridge, he did not make it his aim to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity by force or to eradicate paganism. In an empire that was still overwhelmingly pagan, enforcing Christian belief would have required a degree and a kind of tyranny unknown in the ancient world before the time of Justinian. The memories of the Great Persecution’s failure were in any case too fresh, and Constantine