PROLOGUE

THE EVERLASTING FIRE

The Dark Side of Monotheism, the Bright Side of Polytheism

Religious intolerance was inevitably born with the belief in one God.

—Sigmund Freud,
Moses and Monotheism

Something deep in human nature prompts us to imagine the existence of a power greater than ourselves, whether we call it "Yahweh" or "Christ" or "Allah," "Mother Nature" or "the Higher Power" or "the Universe." Religious belief and practice begins with the origin of the human species—the Neanderthals invented rituals for the burial of the dead—and modern medical science proposes that the idea of "god" is literally hard-wired into the anatomy of the brain. Human beings, in fact, can be distinguished from lower orders of animal life not because we use language or make tools or fight wars, but because we are the only creatures who conceive of a higher power and who are inspired to offer worship and sacrifice to that power.

"Indeed, there is a case for arguing that *Homo sapiens* ['Rational man'] is also *Homo religiosus* ['Religious man']," writes Karen Armstrong in *A History of God*. "Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art."[1]

Nothing in human nature, however, suggests the inevitability of

the notion that there is only *one* god. On the contrary, men and women in every age and throughout the world have offered worship to literally thousands of gods, goddesses and godlings, male and female alike, and they still do. Only very late in the development of *Homo religiosus* did monotheism—"one-god-ism"—first emerge, and whenever some visionary king or prophet sought to impose the worship of one deity to the exclusion of all others, he would discover that ordinary people so cherished their many beguiling gods and goddesses that the very idea of monotheism was appalling. That is why the very first recorded experiment in monotheism was an abject failure, and polytheism has survived every effort to destroy it.

But, fatefully, monotheism turned out to inspire a ferocity and even a fanaticism that are mostly absent from polytheism. At the heart of polytheism is an open-minded and easygoing approach to religious belief and practice, a willingness to entertain the idea that there are many gods and many ways to worship them. At the heart of monotheism, by contrast, is the sure conviction that only a single god exists, a tendency to regard one's own rituals and practices as the only proper way to worship the one true god. The conflict between these two fundamental values is what I call the war of God against the gods—it is a war that has been fought with heart-shaking cruelty over the last thirty centuries, and it is a war that is still being fought today.

The Roots of Religious Terrorism

On September 11, 2001, we were reminded once again of the real meaning of the 3000-year-old conflict between monotheism and polytheism. The men who hijacked and crashed four civilian airliners were inspired to sacrifice their own lives, and to take the lives of several thousand "infidels," because they had embraced the simple but terrifying logic that lies at the heart of monotheism: if there is only one god, if there is only one right way to worship that god, then there is only one fitting punishment for failing to do so—death. At

that moment, we were shown, yet again, the power and the consequences of true belief in monotheism.

Nowadays, the bloodiest acts of violence in the name of God seem to come from the Islamic world, and the hijackers who piloted airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are only the most horrific examples. Other recent incidents include the dynamiting of ancient Buddhist statuary in Afghanistan by the Taliban, who condemned the 1600-year-old artifacts as "false idols" and "gods of the infidels,"[2] the sentencing of Nigerian women to stoning for the sin of adultery and Iranian journalists to death for the sin of blasphemy, and suicide bombings by Palestinian adolescents who seek martyrdom in a *jihad* ("holy war") against nonbelievers by blowing themselves up in the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

But the roots of religious terrorism are *not* found originally or exclusively in Islamic tradition. Quite the contrary, it begins in the pages of the Bible, and the very first examples of holy war and martyrdom are found in Jewish and Christian history. The opening skirmishes in the war of God against the gods took place in distant biblical antiquity, when Yahweh is shown to decree a holy war against anyone who refuses to acknowledge him as the one and only god worthy of worship. Holy war passes from biblical myth into recorded history during the wars of national liberation fought by the Maccabees against the pagan king of Syria and later by the Zealots against the pagan emperor of Rome, which provide us with the first accounts of men and women who are willing to martyr themselves in the name of God. The banner is taken up by the early Christians in the first century of the Common Era, when they bring the "good news" of Jesus Christ to imperial Rome, where the decisive battle in the war between monotheism and polytheism is fought.

The crucial encounter takes place in Rome during the fourth century, when the Roman emperor Constantine worked a revolution in the name of monotheism and then his nephew, the emperor Julian, sought to work a counterrevolution in the name of polytheism. The years in which these two men reigned, one in living memory of the

other, would literally change the history of the world. "For better or worse," remarks Gore Vidal in a novel based on the life of Julian, "we are today very much the result of what they were then."[3] And yet the final victory of God against the gods was not inevitable, and we can see with our own eyes how the Western world teetered between two possible fates during the lifetimes of these two willful, ruthless and charismatic men. Above all, we will glimpse something that is rarely considered in our churches, synagogues and mosques—the dark side of monotheism, and the bright side of polytheism.

Four Kings

Monotheism is classically understood to be a "gift of the Jews," according to Thomas Cahill's felicitous phrase, but the fact is that an eccentric young pharaoh of ancient Egypt was apparently inspired to worship a single god even before "one-god-ism" was embraced by the ancient Israelites. The first recorded experiment in monotheism took place in ancient Egypt in the fourteenth century B.C.E. under the reign of a pharaoh called Akhenaton, and it is likely that the Israelites borrowed the idea from the Egyptians.

Unlike other inventors of new religions, including Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, Akhenaton was not a prophet who preached his gospel to skeptical crowds; rather, he was the absolute ruler of the single most powerful empire in the ancient world. Still, just like those more famous monotheists, Akhenaton discovered that the idea of monotheism is not especially appealing to men and women who are accustomed to worshipping many gods and goddesses. But popularity does not matter when the prophet is also a king—the fiery young pharaoh possessed the power to impose monotheism on an unwilling populace by royal decree.

Akhenaton may have been the first monarch to order his subjects to worship a single god, but he was hardly the last one to do so. Monotheism eventually reached and rooted itself in the land of Israel, but it was rejected by the majority of Israelites as something

strange and unappealing. Starting with Moses, all the prophets who scold the Israelites in the pages of the Bible are wholly unsuccessful in persuading them to confine their worship to the God of Israel. Not until the reign of King Josiah in the seventh century B.C.E.—another monarch who was also a fiery religious reformer—was the religion of ancient Israel fully purged of its pagan taint, and only then because Josiah, like Akhenaton, enjoyed the power to make it so.

But Josiah's war on the gods, like Akhenaton's, did not result in a lasting victory. When Josiah died in battle against an Egyptian pharaoh, many of the Jews drifted back to their old and easygoing ways of worship, and the prophets resumed their bitter but fruitless complaints. Later, the land of the Jews came under the seductive but corrosive influence of the pagan culture called Hellenism—to be an educated and civilized man or woman, according to the Hellenistic ideal, required a familiarity with pagan arts and letters and participation in pagan rituals and celebrations. Now and then, the most pious and zealous of the Jews struggled against the temptations of Hellenism, seeking to enforce the worship of the God of Israel at the point of a sword, but monotheism seemed at risk of remaining only an historical curiosity, the tribal practice of a tiny and powerless people who lived in a backwater of the Near East.

Indeed, the final victory in the war of God against the gods was not achieved until a new superpower emerged in the ancient world—the empire of Rome—and the men who ruled it acquired the apparatus of autocracy. The Roman empire of late antiquity has been characterized as the first totalitarian state in history, and the Roman emperors were able to call on the expert services of an imperial bureaucracy that included spies, informers, inquisitors, torturers and executioners. The king who perfected the Roman autocracy was Constantine, a pagan general who intrigued, conspired and battled his way to the imperial throne in the opening years of the fourth century—and then, fatefully, found God.

To Rome came *all* the faiths of the ancient world, not only the familiar gods and goddesses of Hellenism but a fantastic assortment of

weird, raucous and highly exotic deities from all over the empire. Among the many competitors for the hearts and minds of the Roman citizenry, in fact, the oddest of all were those who confined their worship to only a single all-powerful god—the Jews, of course, and an obscure sect of Judaism that came to be called Christianity. By then, the Jews had made a separate peace with paganism, and they found a way to carry on the worship of the God of Israel throughout the Diaspora without disturbing (or being disturbed by) their pagan neighbors. But the Christians had taken up the old traditions of zealotry that were written large and plain in the pages of the Bible. They called themselves "Soldiers of Christ," and they were eager to fight and die in the name of God.

Constantine favored Christianity, but he refrained from bringing the full weight of imperial authority to bear in the war that the Soldiers of Christ were fighting against all manner of paganism. And so, after the long reigns of Constantine himself and his three Christian sons, the emperor who next took the throne was able to entertain the remarkable idea of restoring the worship of the old gods and goddesses whom he found so enthralling. His name was Julian, and he is recalled in pious Christian history as "the Apostate"—a term that was coined to condemn anyone who has repudiated the teachings of true belief. But Julian also represented the last, best hope for the preservation of everything that was elevating and ennobling about paganism. Between Constantine and Julian, the world faced a choice between two futures, and so the lives and reigns of these two men present us with one of the great "what ifs" of human history.

A Parade of Horribles

Over the last thirty centuries of religious propaganda, starting in the Bible and continuing through the TV evangelists of our own era, paganism has been painted as a parade of horribles. We are instructed to regard paganism as an "abomination," as the biblical authors so insistently put it, a dark and demonic force compounded of harlotry,

idolatry, sorcery and human sacrifice. "The error of polytheism," argues historian Hans Lietzmann, "led the peoples into darkness and moral chaos."[4] The classical paganism of late antiquity—which was, after all, the faith of the high civilization of ancient Greece and Rome—is flatly condemned by one nineteenth-century Christian historian as "the moral disease of the Roman world."[5] Even today, a celebrity cleric like Jerry Falwell insists that the horrors of September 11 can be attributed to the lingering evil of paganism.

The pagan world, to be sure, was hardly a benign place. Common criminals were routinely tortured before they were put to death, and prisoners of wars were sold off as slaves when they were not crucified *en masse*. Women and children in conquered lands were placed in the same category as cattle and chattel—spoils of war that belonged to the victor. But the religious practices and beliefs of paganism were kinder and gentler than we have been taught to believe by our rabbis, priests, ministers and imams. The core value of paganism was religious tolerance—a man or woman in ancient Rome was at liberty to offer worship to whatever god or goddess seemed most likely to grant a prayerful request, with or without the assistance of priests and priestesses, as long as he or she didn't do it in the streets, as a Victorian-era wit once said of women preachers, and scare the horses.

"What does it matter by which wisdom each of us arrives at truth?" muses Symmachus, a pagan prefect of the fourth century. "It is not possible that only one road leads to so sublime a mystery."[6]

By the first century of the Common Era, paganism offered a fabulous array of beliefs and practices from which to choose, ranging from the sedate and stately rituals of worship offered to the gods and goddesses of the traditional Greco-Roman pantheon to the eerie and exotic rites that roused the devotees of such imported deities as Isis, Mithra and the Great Goddess. A few of the pagan cults still engaged in celebrations so spirited that we might characterize them as orgies, but the most common ceremonies of classical paganism—ranging from animal sacrifice to the offering of cakes and libations—were

strikingly similar to the rituals that the Hebrew Bible prescribes for the worship of the God of Israel.

Indeed, many of the commonplaces of paganism will strike the modern reader as both familiar and inoffensive. Tossing a coin in a fountain, for example, is a distant echo of the offerings of jewelry or coins that were made to the gods who were thought to reside in lakes, streams and pools. The horoscope in the morning newspaper recalls the daily astrological readings that a cautious pagan would consult before taking a bath or getting a haircut. Tying a ribbon around a tree is our way of honoring a missing child, but the same gesture was used by the ancients to honor an unseen god. And the essential feature of the shrines where oracles were thought to channel the voices of the gods—"the conjunction of an uncanny place and a canny person," as historian J. L. Myers describes them—can be found in *any* place where one might have a "spiritual" experience, whether a single god or many gods or no gods at all are worshipped there.[7]

Nor was sexual adventure quite as common in paganism as we are led to believe by the scenes of orgiastic excess that we find in biblical writings or Hollywood epics. Although we will encounter a few examples of sex, sacred or otherwise, taking place in the precincts of a pagan temple, the fact is that paganism was as capable of prudery and puritanism as the strictest forms of monotheism. The more exotic rites and rituals were regarded as scandalous by the sober senators of pagan Rome, who insisted, for example, that the worshippers of Bacchus, the god of wine, do their drinking off the public streets. Virginity until marriage and fidelity during marriage were as highly praised—if also as rarely practiced—by the worshippers of Jupiter as by the worshippers of Yahweh. Priestly celibacy was enforced in some pagan cults long before it was adopted by the Christian clergy and in fact the Christians may have copied the whole idea from the hated pagans.

Nor did the pagans seek from their many gods and goddesses anything different from what Christians, Jews and Muslims seek from the deity that they regard as the one and only god. Pagans

prayed for health and happiness, safety and security, a good life here on earth and some kind of salvation in the afterlife. They embraced the values of justice and mercy, and, by and large, they sought to live decent and moral lives: "Temperance, courage, chastity, obedience to parents and magistrates, [and] reverence for the oath and the law," according to the venerable historian Franz Cumont, were the core values of paganism as it was practiced in ancient Rome.[8]

But one crucial quality distinguished Christianity from classical paganism. Polytheists, as we have seen, were not inclined to dictate to others how and to whom prayer and sacrifice should be offered. They were perfectly willing to mix and match gods and goddesses, rituals and beliefs, and they sought the divine favor of many different deities at once. A conquered people might embrace the gods of their conqueror—and the conqueror might return the favor. Nowhere in the ancient world was the open-mindedness more apparent than in imperial Rome. Indeed, Roman paganism was not a religion in the same sense that we use the word to describe Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Rather, what we call "paganism" was, as historian Ramsay MacMullen puts it, "no more than a spongy mass of tolerance and tradition."[9]

" 'Paganism' to the pagan never existed," explains historian John Holland Smith in *The Death of Classical Paganism*. "It is not far from the truth to say that before Christianity invented it, there was no Roman religion, but only worship, expressed in a hundred-and-one different ways."[10]

The Only True God

Monotheism, by contrast, insists that only a single deity is worthy of worship for the simple reason that only a single deity exists. On this point, Judaism, Christianity and Islam agree, at least in principle: the deity that is variously called "Yahweh" or "Lord" or "Allah" is thought to be one and the same god. Pagans certainly understood and embraced the idea that some gods are more powerful than other gods, and phrases like "Supreme God" and "Highest God" fit comfortably

into the language and theology of polytheism. But monotheism insists that the other gods to whom worship is offered are not merely inferior in power or stature; rather, they are false, according to the Hebrew Bible, or even demonic, according to the Christian Bible.

"For though there be gods many and lords many," explains Paul, "but to us there is but one God."[11]

The point is made plain in a phrase that is found in the scriptures of both Christianity and Judaism. The god of monotheism is not only "the living God," not only "the everlasting King," as the prophet Jeremiah puts it, but "the *True God.*"[12] The apostle John is even more plainspoken—the god of monotheism is "the *Only True God.*"[13] By contrast, all of the gods, goddesses and godlings of paganism are "no-gods," in the words of Jeremiah,[14] or even worse, "devils," according to the apostle Paul.[15] To worship the wrong god, according to the value system of biblical monotheism, is not only a sin but a crime, and a crime that is punishable by death.

Monotheism, for example, cruelly punishes the sin of "heresy," but polytheism does not recognize it as a sin at all. Significantly, "heresy" is derived from the Greek word for "choice," and the fundamental theology of polytheism honors the worshipper's freedom to choose among the many gods and goddesses who are believed to exist. Monotheism, by contrast, regards freedom of choice as nothing more than an opportunity for error, and the fundamental theology of monotheism as we find it in the Bible threatens divine punishment for any worshipper who makes the wrong choice. Against the open-mindedness of the pagan Symmachus, who allows that there are many roads to enlightenment and salvation, Bishop Fulgentius (468–533) insists that only a single narrow path leads to the Only True God.

"Of this you can be certain and convinced beyond all doubt," declares Fulgentius, "not only all pagans, but also all Jews, all heretics and schismatics will go into the everlasting fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels."[16]

Here is the flash point of the war of God against the gods. The deity who is worshipped in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is described in the Bible as a "jealous" and "wrathful" god, and he is believed to regard the worship of any god other than himself as an "abomination." The deities who populate the crowded pantheon of classical paganism, by contrast, were believed to be capable of thoroughly human emotions, including envy and anger, but they were never shown to deny one another's existence or demand the death of someone who worshipped a rival god or goddess.

"The pagan gods, even the gods of mysteries are not jealous of one another," explains historian and anthropologist Walter Burkert. " 'Envy stands outside the divine chorus,' as the famous saying of Plato's puts it."[17]

The polytheist can live in harmony with the monotheist: "[M]any pagans could still extend to the new worship," writes historian Robin Lane Fox, "a tolerance which its exclusivity refused to extend to them."[18] Pagan Rome offered the ultimate gesture of respect to the Jews and Christians by adding the God of Israel to the pantheon of gods and goddesses, where he was called Iao and offered worship along with Apollo and Zeus, Isis and Mithra. "If the Supreme God was unknowable, who was to say which one of the many cults of different peoples was right or wrong?" explains Fox. "At its heart, therefore, pagan theology could extend a peaceful coexistence to any worship which, in turn, was willing."[19] But the pagans who did so, of course, missed the whole point of monotheism, and the Jews and Christians refused to reciprocate.

Indeed, the monotheists condemned not only the rude and crude deities of the "barbarians" but even the elegant and refined deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon who were so richly embroidered into the fabric of classical civilization and high culture. A sixth-century Christian militant called Martin of Braga, for example, describes the most revered gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome as demons who had been cast out of heaven along with Satan and now tricked the benighted pagans into offering them worship.

"So one said he was Jove, who was a magician and so incestuous in his many adulteries that he had his sister as his wife, who was

called Juno [and] corrupted his daughters, Minerva and Venus," insists Martin of Braga. "Another demon called himself Mars, who was a perpetrator of strife and discord. Then another chose to call himself Mercury, who was the wretched inventor of all theft and fraud. Another demon took the name of Saturn, who, basking in cruelty, even devoured his sons at birth. Another demon feigned to be Venus, who was a whore. She did not only whore with innumerable adulterers but even with her father Jove and her brother Mars."[20]

For true believers like Martin of Braga, then, the tales that are told in the pages of Homer are not merely charming myths, and the pagan gods are not merely "no-gods"—rather, they are all the work of the Devil. Indeed, the monotheists of late antiquity were convinced that they lived in a world populated with evil spirits, and they relied on amulets and charms, prayers and exorcisms, to keep the Devil and his minions at bay. A vigilant Christian who passed a pagan shrine in town or country, for example, would hiss out loud and make the sign of the cross to scare off the unseen demons that he or she believed to linger there. "The air between heaven and earth is so crammed with spirits, never quiet or finding rest," writes the Christian sermonizer John Cassian in the fifth century, "that it is fortunate for men that they are not permitted to see them."[21]

Thus the militant monotheist condemns polytheism in general as an "abomination,"[22] in the words of the Hebrew Bible, and pagan Rome in particular as the "mother of harlots and the abominations of the earth,"[23] according to the Christian Bible. Precisely because the monotheist regards the polytheist with such fear and loathing, peaceful coexistence between the two theologies is possible only from the pagan's point of view and never for the true believer in the Only True God.

The Tragic Legacy

The strict and uncompromising attitude of monotheism, approvingly described in the Bible itself as "zeal" for the True God,[24] sometimes manifests itself in a strange phenomenon that historians of religion call *rigorism*—that is, "extreme strictness" in religious belief and practice.[25] The Jewish men and women who were the custodians of the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, disciplined themselves to refrain from bowel movements on the Sabbath lest they defile the "Lord's holy day of rest." Among the hermit-monks of early Christianity were men who banished themselves to the desert wilderness, spending years atop stone pillars and feeding themselves only on crushed greens. But paganism, too, produced its own rigorists—some of the Romans who worshipped Isis, a deity who was borrowed from the pantheon of ancient Egypt and embraced throughout the Greco-Roman world, were inspired to show the same kind of devotion to their goddess. "Three times, in the depths of winter, the devotee of Isis will dive into the chilly waters of the Tiber, and shivering with cold, will drag herself around the temple upon her bleeding knees," observes the Roman satirist Juvenal (c. 60–40). "[I]f the goddess commands, she will go to the outskirts of Egypt to take water from the Nile and empty it within the sanctuary."[26]

But, tragically, rigorism is not always or only expressed through acts of self-discipline and self-affliction. Extreme strictness in religious observance is possible only when a man or woman is so convinced of the truth of a certain religious teaching that it becomes quite literally a matter of life or death. Turned inward, rigorism may inspire a true believer to punish himself by holding back a bowel movement or feeding himself on raw vegetables. Turned outward, however, rigorism may inspire the same man or woman to punish others who fail to embrace the religious beliefs that he or she finds so compelling. The history of religion reveals that rigorism in one's beliefs and practices can readily turn into the kind of zealotry that expresses itself in unambiguous acts of terrorism. Indeed, the very first use of the word "zeal" in the Bible is used to describe God's approval of an act of murder, one Israelite murdering another Israelite and his Midianite lover.[27]

Examples can be found in every faith, in every place and in every

age, including our own. A Jewish man in Israel, for example, was recently moved by his own religious passions to open fire with a machine gun on Muslims at prayer in a mosque at the Tomb of the Patriarchs. A Christian man in America was inspired by *his* religious passions to pick up a sniper's rifle and shoot down a doctor who performed abortions. Neither of these true believers would be quick to recognize a kindred spirit in the other, but they both share the same tragic legacy of rigorism, a legacy that is deeply rooted in monotheism.

Nowadays, of course, religious terrorism is carried out by true believers in one or another variety of monotheism against their fellow monotheists, and the same has been true ever since the final victory of monotheism over polytheism in the war of God against the gods. Ironically, the worst excesses of the Crusades and the Inquisition were inflicted by Christians on Jews and Muslims, all of whom claimed to believe in the same god. But the first casualties in the war of God against the gods were found among those tolerant polytheists whom we are taught to call "pagans."

Christian Soldiers

"Pagan" is a word invented by early Christians to describe anyone who refused to recognize the Only True God, and no self-respecting pagan ever described himself as one. Paganism, in fact, has been so thoroughly defamed that our language lacks the words and phrases to describe it in value-neutral terms. "A pagan," according to one of the dictionary definitions of the word, is "an irreligious or hedonistic person."[28] All of the synonyms and variants—"heathen" or "idolater" or "infidel" or "barbarian"—are equally dismissive or derogatory. We are left with the dry and highly technical terms that distinguish between someone who worships only a single god, a "monotheist," and someone who worships more than one god, a "polytheist."

One explanation for the root meaning of "pagan" allows us to see what was at stake in the encounter between monotheism and polytheism in ancient Rome. The word derives from the Latin "*paganus*,"

which originally referred to a "village-dweller" and carried the sense of a "country bumpkin." But the word was also used in Roman military circles to mean "civilian" and to distinguish one who is ready to fight in war from someone who stays behind. According to some scholars, that's precisely the meaning of "pagan" that inspired its first use by Christians—the Christian rigorists regarded themselves as soldiers, ready to march forth as crusaders in a holy war, and they characterized anyone who refused to take up arms in the service of the Only True God as a civilian, a slacker, a "paganus."

"Pagan" eventually came to mean anyone who worshipped any god or goddess other than the deity who was recognized as the Only True God in Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition. For that reason, the term encompasses a multitude of supposed sins, ranging from the elegant rituals of the Roman senator who represented the highest expression of classical civilization in the ancient world to the cruder rituals of the Celtic tribesman who painted himself blue and fought naked against the Roman legions. And Christianity would ultimately carry the holy war in the name of the Only True God to every corner of the Roman empire and far beyond—no distinction was made between the patrician and the barbarian, and the religious practices of each were regarded as equally "abominable" and equally worthy of persecution.

Now and then, a willful and hateful monarch might abandon the long tradition of tolerance that characterized the world of classical polytheism and undertake a war of his own against monotheism—the persecution of Christians in pagan Rome, of course, is the most famous example. Whether the Roman persecutions were quite as pervasive or quite as horrific as depicted in the martyrologies, however, has been the subject of hot debate for several centuries—Edward Gibbon, for example, characterized the worst atrocities as "extravagant and indecent fictions" that were invented to inspire the faithful.[29] Indeed, the spectacle of men and women who went willingly and even ardently to their deaths—and, long afterward, the memory of these martyrdoms and the relics of the martyrs themselves—only stirred the fires of true

belief and inspired ever greater acts of zealotry. Sometimes the pagan magistrates literally begged the Christians to make some gesture of compromise in order to save their own lives.

"Unhappy men!" cried one Roman proconsul to the all-too-willing martyrs. "If you are thus weary of your lives, is it so difficult for you to find ropes and precipices?"[30]

What the pagans found most provocative was not the fact that the Christians chose to worship their own deity in their own way, but that they stubbornly refused to drop a pinch of incense on the altar fire or mumble a few words of prayer in honor of the Roman deities. Ironically, the word "atheist" was first used by *pagans* to describe *Christians* because they denied the very existence of the gods and goddesses whom the pagans so revered. What the Christians saw as an act of conscience, the pagan saw as an act of disloyalty and disrespect—all that was required of them was some simple demonstration of their "civic virtue," which is the phrase that was used by one school administrator to justify the recital of the Pledge of Allegiance when a California court recently ruled it unconstitutional because it includes the phrase "under God."

Whether or not the "Great Persecution" of the early fourth century, the tenth and last of the persecutions carried out against Christianity by pagan Rome, would have been successful in extinguishing or at least containing the fires of true belief, we will never know. Remarkably—and, according to Christian tradition, miraculously—the Christians were rescued from their torturers and executioners when Constantine, one of the many pagan contenders for the imperial crown, managed to prevail in battle over all the others and then put himself under the protection of the Christian god. Here is one of the rare moments when the willful act of a single human being can be said to have changed the course of history.

"Behold, the Rivers Are Running Backwards"

We are encouraged to regard monotheism as a self-evident truth that could not fail to win the heart and mind of anyone to whom it was

revealed. "But nothing made its final victory inevitable," insists historian Diana Bowder. "[T]he final triumph of Christianity and extinction of paganism [were] still far from certain or obvious."[31] Among the many faiths on offer in ancient Rome, all but Christianity and Judaism were polytheistic in origin—and Christianity, as historian Kenneth Scott Latourette concedes, "seemed to be one of the least of many rivals and with no promise of success against the others."[32] Indeed, even after the famous conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity, the outcome could not have been predicted with confidence at any time until the ultimate victory.

"If Christianity had been checked in its growth by some deadly disease, the world would have become Mithraic," speculates the nineteenth-century historian Ernest Renan.[33] "[I]magine how the history we trace in this book would have unfolded," proposes the contemporary historian James Carroll in *Constantine's Sword*, "had the young emperor been converted to Judaism instead."[34]

Indeed, as we shall see, the revolution that Constantine had set in motion was still imperfect and incomplete on his death—the ruling class, the culture and the vast majority of the population of the Roman empire were still pagan. When Julian, no less ambitious and no less visionary than Constantine, ascended to the imperial throne, he promptly revealed his intention to undo everything his uncle had done in the name of the Christian god. "Behold, the rivers are running backwards, as the proverb says!" writes Julian in one of the elegant, highly literate and often bitterly ironic discourses that were his real passion and his only enduring monument. The ancient proverb that Julian quotes was understood to signify that "all is topsy-turvy"—and thus does he acknowledge his own audacity in seeking to undo the revolution that Constantine set into motion and work a revolution of his own.[35]

The Christian emperor and the pagan emperor, in fact, shared much in common. Both of them, like other famous makers of both religions and revolutions, were masters of self-invention. Each was convinced that blessings had been bestowed upon him from on high,

although each credited a different god for his curious fate, and both claimed to have seen divine visions and received divine visitations. Yet they were both driven as much by grudges and grievances as by true belief, and intimate family politics mattered as much as the wars and conspiracies in which they were engaged. Both were so enmeshed in scandal, intrigue and betrayal that their life stories resemble something between a soap opera and a Shakespearean tragedy. Each of them was deeply and decisively influenced by the women in his life—mother, sisters, wives and concubines. Above all, each one sought to remake the world over which he reigned, and each one very nearly did so.

Julian, of course, ultimately failed to reverse the flow of the river of history that Constantine had turned in the direction of monotheism. A spear thrust ended his life, and thus ended his pagan counter-revolution, only two years into his reign. He was still a young man when he died in battle, and if he had lived as long as his uncle, the war of God against the gods—a war that has never really ended—might have turned out much differently. Indeed, as we shall see, it is tantalizing to consider how close he came to bringing the spirit of respect and tolerance back into Roman government and thus back into the roots of Western civilization, and even more tantalizing to consider how different our benighted world might have been if he had succeeded.

BOOK ONE

THE GOD THAT FAILED

You have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have troubled him with weeping, saying, "Why, now, came we forth out of Egypt?"

—Moses, *Numbers* 11:20

◆