Fig. 0.2. Whereas historical studies have traditionally placed the leaders of the church in the spotlight, this volume shifts the focus to the lives of ordinary Christians, such as the one known to us only as "the woman with the issue of blood" (Matthew 9:20-22), depicted in this early fourth-century fresco. Catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS OF HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

What would it mean to conceive of the history of Christianity not as a *history of the church,* but rather as a *history of Christians*? This simple reframing immediately gives rise to further questions. How does one recognize a "Christian"? Is Christian identity a matter of self-profession, or is it inevitably also a social or collective phenomenon? What criteria are invoked, whether implicitly or explicitly, either by the one who makes the profession or by those who choose to acknowledge or deny it? Is "being Christian" fundamentally a matter of subcribing to certain teachings about God or Jesus, the natural world, and the "world" shaped by politics and culture? Is it, alternatively, less a matter of belief than of adopting a certain ethical stance or code of behavior, participating in specific rituals, gathering in certain places, belonging to particular communities, reading certain books, or sharing certain stories? How does a person's Christianity relate to other aspects of his or her identity, such as class, gender, age, race or ethnicity, and familial or sexual roles? To what extent does it entail not only the affirmation but also the exclusion or rejection of certain beliefs, practices, or affiliations? For students of history, the answers to such questions cannot be presumed in advance but must be sought in the records of the past. Our task, in other words, is to attempt to understand what being Christian meant to people living in contexts often very distant and different from ours.

The Roman imperial period, with which this volume is concerned, bequeathed to later generations codifications of doctrine, liturgy, and institutional structure that have proved remarkably enduring. More than that, the legacies of this era have been explicitly marked as authoritative, not only by the various churches but also by a practice of scholarship tellingly labeled "patristics," indicating the study of the "fathers" of Christianity, a group of authors whose writings were affirmed already by the end of antiquity as ecclesiastically legitimate expressions of apostolic tradition

and doctrinal orthodoxy. This conventional focus on the works of a designated theological and institutional elite complicates the task of those seeking a history not of the church but of Christians. When we view ancient Christianity through the lens of the fathers, we see what those fathers and their self-proclaimed successors wanted us to see—namely, a story of steady progress toward unity and clarity of belief and practice. This narrative culminates in the production of such foundational doctrines as the divine Trinity and the two-natured Christ, such carefully scripted rituals as baptism and eucharist, and such widely acknowledged authority as that of the pastoral leader who interprets God's scriptural Word and administers the affairs of God's household. The distinctions between true Christianity and heresy, Judaism, or paganism seem, moreover, reassuringly clear-cut from the viewpoint of traditional church histories.

To be sure, such perceived clarity and continuity of self-definition across space and time are not purely illusory: ancient Christians characteristically thought of themselves as members of a unified and universal community, as reflected, for example, in the early and pervasive practice of letter writing, through which dispersed local communities created networks of communication and alliance. Yet, at the same time, this inherited story, with its selected sources and assumptions, does not tell us nearly enough about how Christianity was actually experienced and practiced by the ordinary people to whom the writings of the fathers were often addressed and to whom they frequently referred. When viewed not from above but on the ground, Christian identity emerges as a far messier and more diverse, and also, we believe, a far more *flexible* and *creative* phenomenon.

It is the aim of the chapters in this volume to draw the reader's gaze away from the transcendent God's-eye view of Christian history, which is itself a product of human imagination as well as an assertion of power on the part of various elites. Instead, we will direct our eyes toward the complex negotiations of Christian identity revealed in the local and everyday practices of men, women, and children. Three themes that will recur throughout our chapters thus already emerge: emphasis on *diversity* rather than sameness, on the *local* rather than the universal, and on *practice* rather than doctrine. Some may see this turn to a "people's history of Christianity" as the secular study of a particular religion; others may experience it as the practice of a genuinely incarnational theology.

At the outset we must acknowledge, however, that "the people" have been assigned a distinctive role in the production of the God's-eye view of Christianity within patristic texts. From the earliest days, Christian writers exploited conventional techniques of rhetorical one-upmanship and social control exercised against rival missionaries and teachers. As charismatic leaders of small communities, the authors presumed spiritual unity with the

members of their communities while also claiming authority by vocation as apostles, prophets, or teachers. A modern sensibility detects the irony in the stances of clergy who claimed they were protecting congregations by casting aspersions on those supposedly elitist intellectuals whom they accused of attempting to distort the simple faith of the people. Those who aspired to authority in ancient Christian communities, not unlike those who aspired to authority elsewhere in Roman society, tended to appropriate the voice of the people and to denigrate their rivals as divorced from the common ideals of the community. The rivals were portrayed as self-promoting members of a troublingly exclusive elite who cared more about developing their own ideas and reputations than about clarifying the contours of shared faith and values. One might thus receive the impression from ancient authors that the Christian people were a unified front, and unified specifically around a spontaneous orthodoxy of belief and practice, balanced against the esoteric innovations of philosophizing heretics and other overly inventive or troublingly ambitious freethinkers and false prophets.

Such an initial impression of popular simplicity or unity is contradicted by the historical evidence. First, we should note that the virginal purity of popular faith *seemingly* so readily embraced by the fathers is not consistent with the intricacies of theological and exegetical debate also clearly valued by those same Christian leaders—who were, moreover, quick to tell the people what they should and shouldn't believe or do! Even in the best of times, necessarily sophisticated theological discourse chafes against the ideal of plain speech embodied in the common Greek of the New Testament. Second, the values attaching to communal debate were not strictly confined to religious professionals. Witness the tireless attempts of Irenaeus to equip the laity of second-century Lyons to distinguish between the "true faith" and "knowledge, falsely so-called," or Tertullian of Carthage's roughly contemporaneous insistence that debate with heretics about the scriptures could result only in a headache or nauseous stomach and thus should be avoided at all costs. In such cases, it is clear that local communities, whether in Gaul or North Africa or elsewhere, encompassed a diversity of interpretations of Christian teaching and practice and accommodated complex patterns of influence, discussion, and debate carried out in a popular arena. Robin Jensen's chapter in this volume provides an illuminating window onto differences surrounding baptismal practice in Tertullian's community, while Judith Perkins explores conflicting opinions regarding the nature of Jesus' body as well as of Christian community in the pre-Constantinian era. Negotiated tolerance was also part of this emerging Christianity. As Irenaeus insisted when addressing the date of Easter, "Our diversity shows our unity."

For the later imperial period, we have more explicit evidence of popular participation in theological debate, not always to the liking of the leaders.

The broadening of Christian community after the end of persecution may have increased the level of popular discussion while also bringing it into line with existing civic models of public debate. Writing in the fourth century, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, for example, expresses his irritation at his theological opponents' penchant for quizzing children in the marketplace about the freedom and mobility of the divine Son and questioning "little women" concerning their memories of childbirth, while another bishop, Gregory of Nyssa, notes with disdain that one could scarcely buy a loaf of bread without discussing the nature of the Trinity during the heat of the Arian controversy. Clearly, the people were no more unified in their positions or practices than were their bishops. The differences among bishops as well as within their congregations surfaced embarrassingly as sharp public disagreements in the period of the ecumenical councils, which were initiated with the fourth-century conversion of the Roman emperors to Christianity. Ultimately, the efforts of the bishops to define and enforce an "orthodoxy" left its mark on imperial as well as ecclesial legislation, as registered in the edicts collected in the Theodosian Code, discussed in the chapters by Kimberly Bowes, David Frankfurter, and Harry Maier.

The era of the imperial councils not only exposes the webs of communication, alliance, and enmity among clergy but also reveals the complex social dynamics operating within tight-knit, if frequently contentious, local communities. Religious leaders were the patrons—and thus the designated representatives—of their people, and they were closely constrained by the religious sensibilities of those people, sensibilities that they no doubt largely shared. In the early centuries of the Christian era, distinctions between clergy and laity, as well as relations among various competing figures of authority (prophets, martyrs, teachers, bishops), were frequently both ambiguous and fluid. The theological controversies of the later imperial period, when ecclesial office was more sharply demarcated, provide instructive examples of the degree to which even bishops attending councils of their peers were still pressured by the desires and expectations of the folks back home.

Symptomatic is Eusebius of Caesarea's letter to his congregation following the famous Nicene Council of 325, in which he attempts anxiously to convince them that the controversial creed to which he had appended his signature was truly the same as the local Palestinian profession of faith. Slightly later, Leontius, bishop of Syrian Antioch, resorts to mumbling the doxology inaudibly in order to avoid outbreaks of conflict among his sharp-eared and sharply divided congregation. More sinisterly, the mob violence accompanying the Council of Ephesus in Asia Minor, considerably exceeding the control of the attending bishops as well as of the emperor's police force, reminds us that the people had their stake in theological disputes:

the women of Ephesus, in particular, were not about to countenance any perceived slights on the exalted status of Mary the God-bearer.

As the last example already hints, with reference to the emerging cult of Mary, doctrinal debates were just the tip of the iceberg. When we examine the constellation of practices that emerge with the cult of the saints, for example, it becomes even more difficult to separate the perspectives of social or ecclesial elites from those of the common people—a point that has been emphasized by such influential Roman historians as Arnaldo Momigliano and Peter Brown, who have questioned the usefulness of the distinction between "popular" and "elite" culture as applied to ancient Christianity. (Of particular relevance here are the chapters by Bowes, Frankfurter, and Dennis Trout.)

The telling of a people's history requires that we read old sources in new ways while also attending to sources that have frequently been ignored, not least the rich realm of material culture. Only recently have scholars of ancient Christianity taken up this challenge, however. For much of the modern period, historians, whether religious or secular, have by and large remained constrained by the monolithic and polemical terms of debate first laid out by the fathers themselves, alternately defending Christianity as a laudably populist movement or critiquing it as the vulgarization of classical civilization. To recover a history of Christians, we must learn to interpret the surviving texts and other artifacts with less reliance on patristic categories and limits. We must develop an eye and an ear for differences that are not always oppositions. We must scrutinize the apparent unity of Christian life and thought in order to perceive the richness of its actual diversity. Christians of the Roman Empire did indeed tend to think globally in representing themselves quite innovatively as an ecumenical or world religion, but they also always acted locally. The local acts and embodied practices as much as the universalizing thoughts of ancient Christians therefore demand our close attention.

At the same time, with regard to a religion that placed a high value on word and book, we should not forget that speech and writing are also practices. Moreover, Christian talk issued forth from the very beginning in a babble of different languages, dialects, and accents, conveying a rich variety of distinctive narrative, doctrinal, and ritual traditions, each of which carried its own history of encounters with non-Christian neighbors, both Jewish and pagan, as is explored in the chapters by Charlotte Fonrobert and Frankfurter. In the multicultural mix of ancient Mediterranean society, these local Christian cultures frequently engaged one another in spirited dialogue—sometimes agreeing, sometimes cross-fertilizing, sometimes colliding violently—but they did not simply merge into a single undifferentiated whole. Indeed, the records of the very debates such as the gnostic,

Montanist, Arian, Nestorian, or Pelagian that frequently structure traditional accounts of the "rise of orthodoxy" indicate that the increasingly vigorous efforts of teachers or bishops, and eventually of emperors as well, to forge consensus and enforce unity on a diverse church often served to intensify awareness of the differences among Christians, differences mapped, for example, in Maier's chapter.

When we listen attentively to the ancient Christians, we do not, then, hear a single people speaking as if with one voice. Rather, our ears are filled with a multitude of voices, some synchronizing harmoniously, some clamoring contentiously, some simply following their own scripts as if oblivious to the strikingly different words issuing from other quarters. Admittedly, such an insistence on the many-voiced diversity of ancient Christianity still leaves an important question unaddressed: who precisely *are* the people who are to be the subjects of this explicitly revisionist "people's history"? Or, to put the question differently, who is *not* part of the people? Already, however, we can see why this question is difficult to answer: "the Christian people" is neither a unity nor an essence, not an "it" but a "they." Indeed, if this volume contributes to our sense of the infinite richness, complexity, and variety of Christian thought and practice in late antiquity—if it, in effect, refuses to give a definitive answer to the question of who the people are—it will have gone far toward achieving the goals of a people's history of Christianity.

Nonetheless, if we want to approach Christianity not from on high but from below, not from the center but from the margins, not from the abstract perspective of the church but from the concrete perspectives of Christians, it will be helpful to consider several possible ways of mapping the angles of our investigation. Specifically, we will here explore the usefulness of locating the people in relation to distinctions of social class, gender, age, lay or clerical status, ethnicity, and (most ambiguously) orthodox credentials of religious purity. Each of these distinctions, as we shall see, proves helpful in certain ways. No single one of them, however, will tell us all we want to know, nor can they simply be combined to produce a single, synthetic definition of "the people."

SOCIAL CLASS

Christianity, it is frequently emphasized, emerged as a movement of the disenfranchised. Jesus and his earliest followers were Galilean peasants, marginal in relation not only to the Roman Empire but also to the Jewish elite who exercised leadership over Judea and its environs in ambivalent collusion with the imperial rule of the Romans. In the course of two unsuc-

cessful Jewish revolts, the first of which resulted in the destruction of the Temple and the second of which made clear that the Jewish state would not recover, the power of the priestly class, based in the Temple cult, came to an end, and Judaism underwent dramatic changes. One strand of Judaism began to reorganize along patterns that eventually gave rise to rabbinic Judaism. At the same time, the Christian movement within Judaism shifted its weight toward the Gentile mission, adopting a spiritual rather than genealogical understanding of its claims on the heritage of Israel. Partly as a result of marking their break with an ethnic, genealogically defined Judaism, Christians—now viewed as practitioners of a new religious movement whose founder had been crucified as a political criminal and whose adherents were deemed antisocial—became the target of intermittent persecution by a militarized imperial regime that desired both to keep the peace and to ensure the support of the gods by promoting traditional piety. Persecution created the context for the emergence of practices and ideologies of martyrdom that placed Christianity in a public stance of political resistance to empire. (See the chapters by Perkins and Robin Darling Young.) Only gradually, in the course of two or three centuries, did Christianity begin to encroach upon the class of civic notables, and it was not until the conversion of the Roman emperors themselves and the end of persecution that the paganism of the senatorial class began slowly to erode, as political favors and power went more and more to those identified with Christianity.

Yet certain sociological factors complicate this view of Christianity as a strictly "lower-class" or simply "anti-imperial" movement even in the period of persecution. Modern understandings of class correspond imperfectly to the realities of an intensely hierarchical ancient Mediterranean society in which relationships were most frequently defined on a vertical axis of patronage rather than on a horizontal axis of class solidarity. Even a slave or former slave might exercise significant powers of patronage, as well as profit from patronage: a vast gulf separated a well-educated slave or "freedman" of the imperial household, for example, from a slave consigned to physical labor or subjected to an owner ill-positioned to award social, economic, or political favors. The earliest-known Christian communities included many of low social status, whether slave or free, but they also enjoyed the support of men and women who were well enough placed, socially and economically, to provide meeting places that could accommodate small congregations as well as food for shared meals, care for the poor, and at least minimal political protection.

At the same time, Christianity—not unlike other schools of Judaism, mystery cults, and philosophical sects—quickly attracted members of a mobile class of teachers and miracle workers, rhetoricians, and philosophers,

who traded on the opportunities for social advancement created by the empire while seeking ways to disrupt the innate privileges of ethnicity and aristocratic class through a persuasive display of acquired skills. The earliest writings produced by Christians, written predominately in Greek, are not high literature, but they do reflect access to literacy, familiarity with rhetorical convention and hermeneutical practice, and general affinities with contemporary cultures of performance and spectacle. Moreover, to the extent that such literature was culturally or politically subversive—and in many respects it was, as Perkins, for example, highlights—it tended to effect its subversions subtly, frequently questioning the dominant culture by slyly invoking or appropriating the values and habits of that very culture. Within Christian communities characterized not only by their social inclusiveness but also by a certain fluidity with regard to social status, class tensions are nonetheless frequently manifested: in the early third century, Hippolytus of Rome, for example, sneered at an episcopal rival, Callistus, for being a former slave.

Such factors not only complicate our view of Christianity as a lower-class or politically radical movement but also help explain the spread of the religion. The conversion of the emperor Constantine, on which a class-based analysis of the growth of Christianity inevitably and appropriately turns, is not merely an explanation for Christianity's success but is itself an event that calls for historical explanation. If Constantine converted to Christianity and if this conversion proved significant, it is in part because Christianity had demonstrated itself marketable to late Roman society. Christianity as a universal and inclusive religion appealed to the social realities of the Roman Empire, even if it violated many of its cultural ideals. The triumphal as well as universalizing worldview of Christians not only provided ongoing sources of resistance to imperial authority but also proved remarkably adaptable to the context of an imperial church, some of whose bishops had also been powerful players in the Roman political system—Ambrose of Milan being an oft-cited example. At the same time, the alliance of the church with the class interests of the political elite was scarcely uniform or stable, even in the late imperial period. Christian episcopacy provided a power base for a new elite whose interests did not always coincide precisely with the goals of their emperors: even Ambrose, who had held the office of consular governor under the emperor Valentinian, perceived in his new role as Christian bishop of Milan the social opportunity not merely to match but to exceed the claims of political office; he is famous for his audacity in instructing and chastising even emperors and empresses.

Then, too, the rising popularity of the ascetic movement continued to create opportunities for both women among the elite and men and women

of the sub-elite to exercise power outside the church's hierarchy, whether through charismatic leadership or sheer strength in numbers and zeal. Indeed, as Elizabeth Clark argues, ancient Christians, despite their egalitarian aspirations, had always produced their own internal social differentiations, articulated not only through ecclesial rank but also through the more ambiguous measure of holiness. As Andrew McGowan points out, meal practices evidence a similar tension between egalitarianism and the replication or production of hierarchies within the Christian community. Sometimes these hierarchies aligned with the class distinctions of the broader Roman world, and sometimes they dramatically disrupted such distinctions. However, the notion of a strictly egalitarian Christian community is as questionable as is the notion of Christianity as a distinctly low-class or proletarian movement. A people's history must thus take account of both the ways in which ancient Christian practices challenged social hierarchies by privileging the unprivileged—the ways, in other words, in which ancient Christianity may be broadly construed as a popular movement—and the ways in which it simultaneously reaffirmed existing class distinctions and gave rise to new ones.

GENDER AND AGE

Ancient Christianity was typically discredited by pagan critics as a religion of gullible women and children. In this way it was also represented as a movement that gravitated toward the suspiciously shadowed spaces of the private sphere—a sphere particularly well illumined by Bowes and Maier. Indeed, despite the patriarchal impulses and anxieties that are present in the earliest layers of documented Christian history, there are indications of a relative gender egalitarianism prevailing in early Christian communities: women as well as men were followers of Jesus, patrons of house churches, presiders at eucharistic meals, acknowledged prophets, venerated martyrs, and ascetic saints. The initial location of Christianity in the domestic sphere seems to have furthered such flexibility, as women typically operated with more freedom and authority in the domestic than in the political arena.

While the extent of women's "liberation" within Christian circles should not be exaggerated, the very evidence of *resistance* to practices such as women's prophesying, teaching, or administering sacraments (and the ability of Christians to draw upon rhetorical convention to express it) suggests that some Christian communities did indeed challenge prevailing gender hierarchies. Paul had famously proclaimed that "in Christ there is no male and female" (Gal. 3:28), though he elsewhere set limits on women's rights to prophesy or speak up in the Christian assemblies (1 Cor. 11:3-16;

14:34-35). Seeming to affirm one aspect of the Pauline tradition while questioning another, the second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* represents its first-century heroine as a cross-dressing missionary who baptizes herself after the apostle Paul has refused to do so. Tertullian, writing near the end of the second century, opposes the use of Thecla's example to support women's right to baptize, indicating that such issues were controversial in his own community, as both Jensen and Perkins note. Martyrdom literature furthermore suggests that the context of persecution might frequently allow for a loosening of gender roles: male martyrs, embracing their own suffering as an opportunity to imitate Christ, took on passive roles that jarred contemporary ideals of masculinity; at the same time, female martyrs like Blandina of Lyons or Perpetua of Carthage were represented not only as Christlike figures but also as triumphant athletes and gladiators, roles strikingly unconventional for women. The early third-century *Passion of Perpetua,* moreover, preserves a sample of Perpetua's own writing, rare in a culture that tended to deny women access to publication. (On martyrdom and its literature, see Young.) A particularly intriguing instance of apparent ritual innovation on the part of women is evidenced in the third-century Syrian *Didascalia,* addressed to a community in which at least some women are following practices relating to menstrual purity, despite their bishops' objections, as discussed by Fonrobert. The diversity of women's roles and attitudes toward them within early Christianity reflects the complexity of the ideas and ideals of gender as lived out in varied communities of the radical sectarian movement.

When Christianity took on a more public face in the post-Constantinian period, the hierarchy of the church as well as the language of theology was decisively masculinized, and the position of women likewise shifted significantly. In this era the Trinitarian nomenclature of Father, Son, and Spirit triumphed, replacing and partly suppressing earlier, more fluid, and less decisively gendered metaphors for God and Christ. Also at that time a clerical hierarchy now allied with emperors took on a more political profile. If some Christians in the third century had begun to express the opinion that women could not hold church office because Jesus had chosen exclusively male disciples (a debatable point, of course), by the fourth century, as the official church was invested with the pomp of public ceremonial rites and architectural monuments, women's institutional leadership became simply unimaginable. Bishops, tellingly, began to be styled "fathers" of the church, in rather literal confirmation of the church's increasingly patriarchal constitution, as reflected, for example, in Athanasius's habit of designating the bishops who attended the Council of Nicea as "fathers."

Nonetheless, the simultaneous rise of asceticism, which permeated Christian culture in this period, disrupted the long-standing cultural

authority of the patriarchal family and thereby extended traditions that, like martyrdom earlier, allowed for considerable flexibility of gender roles. Some men now actively shunned public roles, and even powerful bishops might find it advantageous to represent themselves as humble and retiring figures, while many women—especially elite women—gained unprecedented power and visibility, as is detailed by Clark. In addition, the fourth century witnessed the emergence of a remarkable new literary phenomenon, namely, the production of female biographies, launched with Gregory of Nyssa's hagiographical tribute to his sister Macrina. Thus, even in the post-Constantinian period, attitudes toward women remained diverse and contested.

If the history of women has for some decades attracted much attention, the history of children within early Christianity is only beginning to be explored. It is well known that ancient Christians made much use of the language of birth and infancy to describe the experience of conversion and resocialization. This image of Christians as children was conveyed pedagogically through catechesis and performed liturgically in rites of baptism, which marked even adults as newborn infants, and in the feeding of the postbaptismal eucharist, which in at least some places included a cup of milk and honey. (See the chapters by Jensen and McGowan.) Less clear, however, is how childhood, understood in a more literal sense, was configured socially within the Christian community. In this area, Cornelia Horn's chapter on the toys, games, and play practices of Christian children breaks important new ground. The not-infrequent representations of young girls and boys in martyrdom accounts as well as in ascetic lives suggests both that children were understood to partake fully in the life of Christian witness and that their accomplishments were particularly valued precisely because they were unexpected and thus all the more potent testimony to the power of the Christian God. It is far less surprising, for example, that the mature Alexander steps forward voluntarily to confess his Christianity, as depicted in the *Letter of the Martyrs of Vienne and Lyons* than that the fifteen-year-old boy Ponticus has the courage to face torture without wavering. It is less surprising too, perhaps, that the adult ascetic Antony persevered in his fights with the demons than that, already as a young boy, he eschewed dainty foods or other material comforts, as well as the pleasures of sociality.

Turning from the young to the elderly, we note that widows held a significant, albeit distinctly ambiguous position in early Christian communities. Privileged recipients of charity within Christianity as within Judaism, they also appear to have exercised quasi-clerical authority in many communities. In addition, there is frequently a blurring of distinctions in our sources between women who were widowed and those who actively chose

Fig. 0.3. Sometimes the ordinary Christians whose stories are preserved remain nameless. At other times, all that is left is the name, as is the case with one Severa, whose epitaph was found in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican Museums, Vatican State. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

a life of celibacy, whether by avoiding or leaving marriages—a fact that further challenges any view of Christian widows as simply recipients of charity. Older men were not typically marked with similar vulnerability but rather profited from their venerability as communal elders—as is indicated by the term "presbyter" or "elder," which is among the earliest titles of ecclesial office. Nonetheless, there are indications that elderly men, as well as women, could be viewed with a certain tender compassion by their Christian communities. One thinks, for example, of the eighty-six-year-old bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, represented as bruising his shin and fumbling awkwardly with his shoes in the course of his martyrdom, or of the frail ninety-year-old Pothinus of Lyons, who did not survive the tortures of prison life to make his witness in the arena. Overall, we detect within ancient Christianity many signs of the poignant attraction and resultant authority exerted by figures of vulnerability—women, children, the elderly. Such sensibilities in the ancient sources provide a fertile resource for a people's history.

LAY STATUS

"Laity" is the traditional technical term by which ancient Christians themselves named the people, thereby setting up a contrast between the people and the clergy. However, the progressive clarification, elaboration, and intensification of clerical authority, tightly linked with both the protection of doctrinal orthodoxy and the restriction of sacramental powers, emerged more gradually and unevenly than is usually imagined. In addition, and still more significant, clerical authority remained haunted by competing claims to authority at or beyond the margins of the institutional hierarchy. As is typical of emerging sectarian movements, earliest Christianity accommodated a complex ecology of authority and power, encompassing diverse models of organization and participation, some more centralized and others more diffuse. All appealed to charismatic authority, and disputes over leadership and authenticity were intense; in the early centuries, the roles of bishops, teachers, presbyters, prophets, martyrs, and others often over-

lapped. The earlier uses of terms like "holy ones" or "people" were, moreover, not markers of difference between clergy and laity but inclusive terms for the community as the people of God.

The very fact that bishops found it necessary throughout the ancient period to ally themselves with the social authority of more charismatic figures highlights the continuing ambiguity that characterized the distinction between clergy and laity. Ignatius of Antioch, frequently (but perhaps misleadingly) hailed as the first bishop, could only persuade his early second-century audience of his authority by speaking in the "loud voice" of a prophet (his words, tellingly: "obey the bishop!") and making the most of his status as a soon-to-be martyr. The distinction between the laity and the order of the clergy only emerged forcefully in the third century with the consolidation of the office of the monarchial bishop. Nonetheless, in the fourth century Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (to take only one example) was still marshaling the same resources as Ignatius in order to buttress his own episcopal authority. He represented himself, via his disputes with heretical opponents and their imperial backers, as a persecuted martyr for orthodoxy while borrowing the aura of sanctity of desert holy men like the ascetic Antony, a participant in what was a popular lay movement in its origins. To Roman eyes, the combination of a permanent elected office and the undergirding of that office by charismatic authority made bishops an odd social phenomenon. Furthermore, aristocratic men were not used to mixing with women or lower-status people on any sort of equal terms, and the frequency of conflict in fourth-century Christian communities in part reflects the clash of religious and social customs and ideals. The efforts of well-educated bishops such as Ambrose and Augustine to incorporate popular practices into official worship and to integrate ascetic women and other powerful members of the laity into ecclesial life exemplify the ideal of the spiritual unity of the community as well as the shrewd leadership exercised within a socially diverse movement.

When we turn our attention away from issues of leadership to matters of practice, both the limits of clerical authority and the blurring of boundaries between clergy and laity become still more evident. Private prayer, love feasts, saints' cults, practices of menstrual purity, icon veneration, magical rites, ascetic disciplines—thus unfurls the expansive realm of lay piety, largely uncontrolled by the clergy yet always interfacing with the realm of official liturgy and the concerns of institutional leadership. The point is not merely that the clergy's ability to impose discipline on extra-ecclesial ritual was limited—though clearly it was—but that the lived experience of Christian communities gave rise to a diversity of religious practices that spanned the boundaries between ecclesial and extra-ecclesial realms, even as the public and private arenas of ritual performance overlapped

and bled into each other at multiple points. One cannot, in other words, make easy distinctions between official liturgy and popular cult. Even baptism might be administered by a layperson, as Jensen's treatment of Tertullian reminds us. Cultic meals were a still more mobile and malleable phenomenon, taking place not only on the bishop's altar but at the tombs of martyr saints and in the homes of Christians (sometimes, but not always, utilizing elements sanctified at the bishop's altar), as discussed by McGowan, Bowes, and Trout. Relics, and the rites and miracles associated with them, might similarly be found under the altar, in saints' shrines, in homes or private chapels, preserved in small caskets or bottles, or worn as a protective amulet around the neck, as Bowes, Frankfurter, Horn, Trout, and Young all demonstrate. The efficacious magic of words might be accessed by priests in the official liturgy or by a holy man or woman appealed to for help with a specific problem, as Frankfurter shows. And the empowering life of ascetic discipline described by Clark was equally accessible to a bishop, whose authority would be thereby enhanced, and to an uneducated monk or nun.

Lay piety opens an extremely important window onto the history of the Christian people, and it is no accident that many of the chapters in this volume deal, in one way or another, with this phenomenon. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that in late antiquity, if not also in other periods of Christian history, the notion of a realm of religious practice that is separate from or simply outside the institutional church is as untenable as is the notion of a realm of popular religion that is distinct from or even opposed to the religion of the elite. Despite the many instances and indicators of clerical disapproval of certain extra-ecclesial rites, detailed in Frankfurter's explorations of language censuring popular ritual, bishops and aristocrats were as likely to participate in saints' festivals or traffic in relics as were the common people. Laity and leaders alike were caught up in the complex choreography of processions, festivals, cultic meals, and other performative rites that established the distinct rhythms of time and mappings of space that structured Christian identity in late antiquity.

ETHNICITY

From the command of the risen Jesus to the disciples to go to all nations and baptize all people (Matt. 28:19) to the descent of the Spirit manifested in the varied tongues of the Jewish diaspora (Acts 2), the earliest Christians claimed to embrace all places and peoples. In antiquity one's *ethnos* or "race" was an essential marker of culture and religion as well as regional

identity, so that the Christian rejection of traditional ethnic identity or its replacement by the concept of an inclusive third race was a way to declare this religion universal, thereby erasing such social or geographical boundaries. To a great degree this claim was realized, as Christianity spread rapidly throughout the culturally diverse cities and towns of the Roman Empire and beyond to regions such as India. The traffic and dialogue between cultures that was already mobilized by the empire was intensified in local Christian communities that ascribed to the ideal of ethnic inclusiveness while also understanding themselves as participating more broadly in a universal church that incorporated still greater differences.

At the same time, ethnic distinctions inevitably persisted, as is evidenced in the rich variety of forms Christianity took in different locales. In addition, the dynamics of power as well as the specific polemics invoked in situations of conflict reflected contemporary ethnic categories and prejudices, many of which were tied to the power of the literary and political elite. The Greek speakers, and later also the Latin speakers, living in the urban centers of the empire claimed the authoritative voice of an ecumenical Christianity, whereas Christians in more remote or rural sites were correspondingly marginalized or even, on occasion, viewed with suspicion. As was the case with gender or class status, the ancient Christian redefinition and negotiation of ethnic identity preserved the tension between the reach for a radically egalitarian inclusiveness and the stubborn tug of hierarchical distinctions.

Historically, "barbarian" was a Greek category of denigration that applied to all non-Greek speakers, and thus the term carries an assertion of cultural superiority on behalf of Greeks. However, the extension of Greek language and culture around the eastern Mediterranean under Alexander the Great (fourth century BCE) and his successors had long since created complex fusions of local (or "barbarian") cultures and Hellenic ideals in such regions as Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. At the same time, non-Greek cultures exerted a particular attraction for their Greek colonizers: Egypt was especially alluring because of its venerable antiquity, as was Judaism. As these Mediterranean areas subsequently became subject to Roman power, another layer of imported culture and politics was added to the mix. Religiously, therefore, people of the Roman Mediterranean inhabited a rich and eclectic world of local and regional traditions while also enjoying varied degrees of access to and acceptance of broader, universalizing political, philosophical, and cultic affiliations. Cities in particular offered a display of Greek ideals visible in architecture or social institutions like the gymnasium, layered over and blended with prior, non-Greek cultural values and practices. The extent of Hellenization in the country-

side was uneven and must be carefully examined with reference to particular cases. Some religious cults remained highly local, if also often extremely eclectic. Others were both more mobile and more explicitly universalizing, such as the cult of Isis, which drew on the cultural authority of ancient Egypt while claiming that its goddess—who was worshipped in Rome and Carthage as well as Alexandria—represented the sum of all local deities and powers. Thus ethnicity was an essential and pervasive aspect of identity in late antiquity, yet scarcely simple or stable.

As Christianity, like the Isis cult, spread through the towns and cities of the Mediterranean, communal debates and disputes reflected the tensions arising out of such complexly layered and continuously negotiated ethnic identities. Judaism in the first centuries was a widely respected ancient *ethnos;* notable for its exclusivity, it also accommodated aspects of cultural adaptation and mission activity. The emergence of Christianity is therefore an extension of the adaptive development of Jewish identity in late antiquity. Outside observers initially understood early Christians as part of the Jewish *ethnos,* as did many Christians themselves. The canonical book of Acts preserves a narrative in which Paul's controversial vision of a radically universalizing Judaism includes Gentiles (that is, non-Jews) without the requirements of circumcision or observance of traditional dietary laws. This perspective is echoed in Paul's letters, such as that to the Galatians, which states explicitly, "In Christ there is no longer male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free" (3:28). The ethnically mixed communities of Christians, including both Jews and a variety of non-Jewish ethnicities, were in conflict with other communities that continued to observe traditional Jewish practices. Such conflicts continued, moreover, well into the fourth century, as Fonrobert demonstrates. As Christianity and Judaism developed more separate identities, the emerging requirement of rabbinic Judaism for matrilineal descent may reflect a reaction to the inclusive Christian practices of conversion and baptism.

Geographical mobility enabled by the empire simultaneously disrupted and intensified the significance of a shared ethnic identity, and this is powerfully reflected in the early history of Christianity. The earliest mission communities took root in ethnically distinct sections of urban centers, so that the first Christians in the predominantly Latin-speaking city of Lyons, for example, were Greek speakers with strong ties to Asia Minor. In Rome, Christian teachers arrived from all parts of the empire, including Alexandria, Pontus, and Palestine, and their ethnic origins remained a significant part of their identity, even as they participated in a shared Hellenistic rhetorical and philosophical culture. However, when asked to divulge their political status or ethnic background in the context of perse-

cution, Christians would typically refuse, declaring instead their new identity: "I am a Christian." The *Epistle to Diognetus* notes that to Christians "every foreign land is a homeland, every homeland a foreign land." Some Christians defined themselves as a third race distinct from either Hellenism or Judaism. The Syrian author Tatian claimed the Greeks had in fact stolen their culture from the barbarians and that Christians represented the original wisdom that underlay these barbarian cultures.

If such universalism was appealing, tensions between localities, as well as between different ethnic groups within a given locale, also frequently surfaced, as in the debate regarding the difference in calculations for the date of Easter in Rome and Asia Minor. Polemical categories invoked by ancient Christians also reflected common patterns of ethnic competition and insult, as revealed, for example, in the depiction of the controversial Christian leader Marcion as a gloomy teacher from Pontus, of the Montanists of Asia Minor as rural "hicks," or of the Ethiopians as culturally marginal and dark with sin. Such evidence calls attention not only to the geographical diversity and inclusiveness of the communities but also to the vulnerability of members to the prejudices and polemics of mainstream society during conflicts.

With the establishment of the imperial church in the fourth century, the role of ethnicity in Christian communities shifted. The voices of the rural communities began to emerge in indigenous Christian literature in Coptic and Syriac as Christianity spread slowly into the countryside. Monastic literature often represents these voices. The relation of the urban leaders to such local traditions and identity was extremely important. Increasingly, the social status of church leaders rose so that they were often part of the provincial elite who received Hellenic education or *paideia* while also retaining their local identities, the traces of which could produce tension or even embarrassment. Augustine, for example, worried about his African accent when he went to Italy to seek his fortune as a rhetorician. When Gregory of Nazianzus became bishop of Constantinople, he was ridiculed by the crowd for his provincial dress and manner, even though he had been educated in Athens. Athanasius was the first Alexandrian bishop whom we know to have preached in Coptic as well as Greek; John Chrysostom preached in both Greek and Syriac. Urban leaders therefore were often the slender bridge between the empire-wide ecclesiastical community and the local congregations and Christian cultures of their regions.

The continual doctrinal debates of the fourth and fifth centuries likewise reflected aspects of emerging ethnic and regional diversity within late ancient Christianity. Part of Bishop Athanasius's passion to enforce the Nicene Creed during the so-called Arian controversy was fueled by his

desire to preserve the orthodox credentials of his episcopal predecessor Alexander in the context of the Alexandrian church. Other places and people properly claimed not to be a part of this doctrinal fight between an Alexandrian bishop and his presbyter Arius, but their local dispute was eventually judged by the ecumenical councils and the universal creeds and canons that they produced. The interaction between local and translocal theaters of debate and adjudication meant not only that regional pieties could be disciplined by the decisions of bishops from elsewhere but also that labels of heresy could be dislodged from their original contexts and used to discredit Christians who had no relation at all to the beliefs and practices initially targeted by such labels.

Thus, Ambrose of Milan accused certain Western bishops of Arianism and named others "Egyptian heretics." The Donatist controversy reflected even more clearly the tension between regional or ethnic Christianities and widespread desires to institutionalize a catholic or ecumenical orthodoxy that would encompass all Christians. In the course of bitter and sustained conflict between Christians rooted in traditional North African piety and those more influenced by Roman theology and practice, the North African traditionalists mocked their opponents as Romans, implying that they were both persecutors and foreigners. The split of the Eastern church between Chalcedonian and Monophysite parties, as well as the eventual split of the Western church from the Eastern churches, was again tied to regional cultures, genealogies, and loyalties that appeared to be compromised by imperially backed theological legislation. The strength of local ethnic identity and tradition is furthermore evident in the autocephalous, or institutionally independent, churches of Eastern Orthodoxy, which continue to be defined by separate languages and regions, if also bound together by doctrinal definitions. The spur to a lasting universal orthodoxy ironically mirrors the realities of local diversity.

Ancient Christianity therefore always located itself in the tension between the lived religion of local cultures and the universalizing, transethnic aspirations of believers. By late antiquity, however, the Christianization of the countryside, where highly dynamic localized cultures flourished, as Frankfurter shows, combined with heightened pressures to conform to a universalizing imperial church, producing both an intensification and an increased visibility of ethnic and regional differences in the churches. With the erosion of Roman imperial power, much of the institutional infrastructure of an ecumenical church likewise disintegrated, even as ethnic differences increased. Nonetheless, the ideal of unity and universalism was never abandoned: in the medieval and Byzantine periods, as in the Roman era, Christian identity would rest on the particular, local interpretations of

a common gospel issuing from a variety of places, cultures, and linguistic traditions.

ORTHODOXY AND HETERODOXY

Does "orthodoxy" include the voice of the people? As we have already seen, ancient orthodoxy did indeed claim to represent the doctrinal voice of *all* Christians, articulated through the legislation of clergy and other elites. As the congregants of their institutional leaders, the people, therefore, are assumed to be included in and protected by the voices of those traditionally designated the fathers of the ancient church. Yet there is a problematic circularity attending any definition of "the people" in which the only people who count are those already counted among the faithful—that is, those who are within a community limited and defined in advance by its agreement with the definitions of the authorized leaders. By opening the view to embrace a larger population and realm of practices as Christian, we are here shifting the criteria invoked to identify Christians and thus to evaluate and interpret the historical practices and beliefs of an ancient people of faith.

The earliest Christian communities included a variety of voices and testimonies as preserved in the numerous gospels, letters, and other writings of the first two centuries of Christian history. These documents include references to charismatic practices accessible to all members of the communities, such as healing or speaking in tongues. Spiritual discernment in relation to these often controversial gifts frequently focused on ideals of unity: were they offensive to some members of the community, even if otherwise lawful or appropriate? Theological questions such as those addressing the physical resurrection of Jesus, as discussed by Perkins, were also used as measures of identity and unity, but no central authority or source of definitions existed. Thus, in the Epistles of John, members are advised to test travelers before offering hospitality; presumably those rejected found another more welcoming community. Given the popular level and appeal of much early Christian literature, which included tales of miracle-working apostles, riveting accounts of "witnessing" deaths, and collections of pithy and repeatable wise sayings, together with the ethnic, class, and gender diversity of characters represented therein, we can infer the presence of wide and varied audiences. The charismatic basis of the early Christian communities as well as their geographical and cultural diversity encouraged both theological breadth and internal controversy, as is already evident in Paul's letters, the earliest surviving literary witnesses to ancient Christianity.

In the second century, leaders like Irenaeus and Tertullian began to argue for the existence of an orthodoxy that was articulated in a rule of faith representing the universal and apostolic teaching of the gospel purportedly discoverable in every authentic Christian community. They asserted that this shared faith was not merely the creation of the leaders but also the voice of the people: even those who were not literate, they claimed, could both recite and affirm the foundational beliefs in God as creator and Jesus as divine. The identity and stability of the community rested on corporate faithfulness to these beliefs, though the guaranteed authenticity of teachers now located in the succession of bishops ensured the continuity of Christian faith. These early manifestos on behalf of orthodoxy were issued in response to competing teachers, especially the so-called Gnostics, who were considered to be innovative and elite and who diverged from traditional doctrines and met separately from the apostolic churches.

Given that our map of heterodoxy is provided by polemical literature written by elites, it is extremely difficult to judge the popularity of theological movements as they were once encountered on the ground. How many people, and what manner of people, adhered to gnostic rather than orthodox beliefs? Would the differences between the two have been apparent to most? Such questions are not easy to answer. A rule traditionally invoked for identifying popularly affirmed piety is *lex orandi, lex credendi,* meaning "the rule of prayer is the rule of belief." However, the matter is not so simple: the pressure for a rule of faith was exerted precisely because even those participating in a shared liturgy could do so with differing theological understandings. Moreover, the fine, albeit significant, distinctions of theological debate are quite difficult to discern in the recorded confessions of the martyrs or the preserved prayers and epitaphs of early Christians.

In the first three centuries Christian practice and belief remained therefore local and subject to the authority acknowledged within a particular community. Authors circulated letters to advise about dangerous opinions or teachers, but orthodoxy was enforced only by local leaders. Controversial individuals such as Origen of Alexandria could simply move. Although his own bishop condemned him, neighboring bishops welcomed and even ordained Origen as a revered teacher and exegete. Tertullian in North Africa reflected both a strong defense against heresy and a willingness to debate controversial questions with clerical authorities. As late as the third century, Dionysius of Alexandria reported that a longstanding lay member of his community had only recently realized that he had been baptized in a heretical group. When a synod of bishops condemned Paul, a popular bishop of Antioch, he refused to give up his church and, presumably because of his congregation's support, could only be put

out by a change in imperial authority. Christian leaders and people therefore operated on a map of diverse, and often diverging, beliefs and practices.

The fourth-century emergence of imperial councils to define and enforce doctrinal consensus gradually changed this diffuse orthodoxy. Fragile literary networks of agreement now could acquire the backing of imperial enforcement, with the result that bishops vied with one another to convince the emperor of their orthodoxy—as well as to persuade the emperor of what version of Christianity should be upheld as orthodoxy. Emperor Constantius could be David or the Antichrist to Athanasius, depending on his agreement with the Nicene formula. Legislatively and rhetorically articulated, imperial orthodoxy created a map of identity that eventually labeled all other ancient religions as well as varied theological errors "heresy." The function of such exhaustive cataloging and enforcement was to stabilize and exclude whatever was outside the hard-won consensus of Christian truth. The result was labels that could be applied pejoratively to any suspect theology or practice and therefore subject such beliefs or rites to ecclesiastical control or political discipline. Cyril of Alexandria could thereby, for example, release the laity of Constantinople from obedience to their bishop Nestorius, on the grounds that his Antiochene Christology was really adoptionist heresy. Ascetic women were particularly vulnerable to charges of Gnosticism or Manichaeism, as prior polemics against heretical women were invoked and intensified. Many traditionalists in the fourth century found themselves labeled "Arians" because of their subordinationist Christologies. If heresy was now made a matter of public security for the imperial church, orthodoxy thrived less by the articulation of clarity at the center than by the proscription of error at the edges.

This new centralization of authority still functioned in tension with and by consent of local communities and leaders. We have evidence of public demonstrations and debates around doctrinal issues, as would be usual in antiquity. Whether the resulting acclamations of consensus were spontaneous or orchestrated is difficult to judge, though it is clear that clerical and doctrinal authority rested to a great degree on popular acceptance. Ambrose wrote hymns to encourage his congregation to resist Arians in Milan. Theophilus of Alexandria changed his theological position on the image of God when confronted by hundreds of monks who flooded in from the desert. Donatists in North Africa celebrated martyrs who would not submit to imperial orthodoxy. The people of Alexandria lynched a bishop who had signed an imperial creed that they felt compromised their local theology. The Monophysite churches embraced the Nicene Creed liturgically as a means of rejecting the decisions of the council of Chalcedon. Ancient orthodoxy therefore was a public and contested matter, which only allowed enforcement if the local bishop had the consent of the populace.

Nestorius alienated the emperor and factions within Constantinople by his attempts to enforce orthodoxy in the city and thus ended up exiled as a heretic himself. Yet how successfully such power reached into private space remains debatable. The regulation of private reading by Athanasius and the later condemnations of Priscillian's use of the Apocrypha were attempts to create an orthodox practice, as was the emphasis on public liturgy as opposed to private ritual. Yet, as Augustine warned a colleague, all theological mistakes are not heresy: thus we see a curious hierarchy of doctrinal unity defended by leaders who acknowledge a diversity and popular practice beneath. The language of orthodoxy was an essential marker of identity, but it often remained a prescriptive rather than a descriptive religious dialect.

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT IS A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY?

Traditionally, ancient Christianity has been approached as either a religious institution or a doctrinal orthodoxy defined by the tension between a center and its unruly margins. A people's history, in contrast, invites us to view Christianity in the Roman period as the complex social and cultural product of multiple, dynamic local communities of practicing believers linked to one another (sometimes very tenuously indeed) by long-standing habits of communication and communion undergirded by ideals of universality and unity. These ideals, of course, simultaneously criticized, competed with, and imitated the ambition of the Roman Empire itself to conquer the world and thereby constitute an ecumenical society. The dialectic of diversity and unity mobilized by the Christianity of the Roman Empire entailed both an ongoing, even restless process of communal self-definition and a near-constant shifting of boundaries of identity that together account for much of the vitality and creativity, as well as the staying power, of the movement.

Attention to the factor of social class allows us to acknowledge the variety of ways that Christianity effectively subverted elite privilege and imperial authority, even in the post-Constantinian period; ancient Christianity may thus be seen as a broadly popular and democratizing movement. Yet we also cannot overlook the ways in which Christian communities actively embraced imperial patronage and affirmed class privilege while generating their own class distinctions along a variety of gradients, including ranks of church office and attributions of holiness. Perhaps the most notable characteristic of ancient Christian communities, from such a social perspective, is the instability and flexibility of social hierarchies, rather

than their absence. Similarly, attention to factors of gender or age does not so much produce a picture of Christianity as a movement of women, children, and the elderly—or alternately, as a movement in which distinctions of gender or age did not matter—as allow us to appreciate the ways in which flexibility was introduced.

At first glance, one of the areas of relative *in*flexibility within ancient Christianity is exposed by the incessant clerical monitoring of doctrine and liturgy, best exemplified by the institution of the ecumenical council. Yet, here too, focus on local communities—and we should not forget that there is no Christianity that is *not* embedded in a local community, whether urban or rural—betrays the vast diversity and ongoing malleability of practices of piety as well as articulations of belief only loosely woven into the fabric of a unified, ecumenical church. If certain practices and beliefs were periodically excised via disciplinary processes, frequently by being branded either "pagan" or "Judaizing," these heresies not only left their traces on the patterning of orthodoxy but also often persisted in private pockets of worship and communal life, sometimes reconverging subsequently with the broader church. As antiquity neared its end, with the waning of the power of the Roman Empire, regional Christianities shaped by ethnic and linguistic differences and divided by political boundaries began to diverge further, even as the ideal of Christian universalism or ecumenicity was never relinquished. The spontaneous emergence of distinctive Syrian, Armenian, Coptic, Gallic, and Celtic traditions, for example, only heightens our awareness of the ways in which ancient Christianity had always manifested itself as and in the interweaving of multiple, differentiated local practices arising at the borders of religious and cultural exchange.

A people's history is not, finally, an optional addition or supplement to traditional histories of the church that emphasize doctrinal, liturgical, or institutional unity and stability. Rather, it contributes to a thoroughgoing revision of our understanding of late ancient Christianity as a whole.