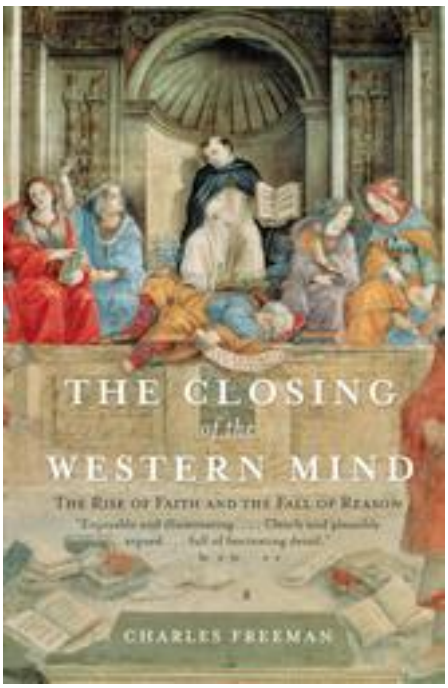

The Closing of the Western Mind: The Rise of Faith and the Fall of Reason

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A radical and powerful reappraisal of the impact of Constantine’s adoption of Christianity on the later Roman world, and on the subsequent development both of Christianity and of Western civilization.

When the Emperor Contstantine converted to Christianity in 368 AD, he changed the course of European history in ways that continue to have repercussions to the present day. Adopting those aspects of the religion that suited his purposes, he turned Rome on a course from the relatively open, tolerant and pluralistic civilization of the Hellenistic world, towards a culture that was based on the rule of fixed authority, whether that of the Bible, or the writings of Ptolemy in astronomy and of Galen and Hippocrates in medicine. Only a thousand years later, with the advent of the Renaissance and the emergence of modern science, did Europe begin to free itself from the effects of Constantine's decision, yet the effects of his establishment of Christianity as a state religion remain with us, in many respects, today. Brilliantly wide-ranging and ambitious, this is a major work of history.

The Closing of the Western Mind: The Rise of Faith and the Fall of Reason Details

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From Reader Review The Closing of the Western Mind: The Rise of Faith and the Fall of Reason for online ebook

Lobstergirl says

This book had been languishing on my shelf ever since I bought it in 2005. I think it was one of those broccoli books (which is really a misnomer since I freaking love broccoli)...books that you buy because they look like they'd be good *for* you rather than hedonistic romps. The Western Mind! Faith, Reason! It sounds like a mini-education!

It is - and the book was an absolute pleasure to read, hard to put down. Freeman seems to be some kind of "freelance" historian - like a Barbara Tuchman, I guess - and he writes brilliantly. All is clear, coherent, beautifully explained, and the paragraphs and chapters flow into one another without resistance. He begins with ancient Greece (don't worry, he doesn't get that deep into the weeds as he only has 340 pp. to work with), Greek philosophy and Greek science, and the rationality of the Greek mind. Even though the Greeks got a lot of stuff wrong, science-wise, they had the right idea: look at things empirically, use the senses to figure out what might be going on. And of course this rationality coexisted with faith - pagan belief in gods. Then we come to Christianity. Jesus and Paul each get their own chapters. This book will be good background as I reread the New Testament. It's with Paul that we get the beginnings of the fall of reason: Paul is very anti-philosophy. Freeman goes into a lot of history on the Roman emperors and the church/state nexus, the eastern church vs. the western church, the results of the battles over doctrine, and how faith rather than reason won these battles. Augustine is a monumental figure here; he seemed to revere Paul but pay very little attention to Jesus, and the church moved further away from rationality. Freeman finishes up with Thomas Aquinas, who folds Aristotle into his theology and thus presages a return to a certain kind of reason and rationality.

The endnotes are thorough and superb. There is an ample bibliography.

Lynn Weber says

This was an incredible history of the transition from the classical world to the medieval world, centering in particular on the rise of Christianity within the context of an increasingly brittle, and thus authoritarian, Roman empire. One of the best nonfiction books I've ever read. In one poignant passage, Freeman talks about the first astronomical observations recorded in Greece in 585 BCE by Thales---the accurate prediction of an eclipse. The last astronomical observations in the classical world was made in 475 CE, and it would be almost 1100 years before another was recorded, by Galileo . . . so far had the respect for natural knowledge and science fallen.

Art says

While I'm not completely convinced of the author's central argument--that the rise of Christianity and the waning of Greek intellectual tradition were not merely coincident, but that the former has a causal relationship with the latter--I have to say that this is an absolutely riveting history of early Christianity.

One thing I found particularly interesting is how much of what I'd considered fundamental tenets of Christianity had no basis in scripture but rather are the work of a small handful of influential theologians. For instance, Christianity's disdain for sexuality is based *solely* on the writings of men who clearly had serious issues that they projected into their theology--Paul and Augustine, for example.

Freeman also runs down some obligatory fidelity of transmission issues. For example, the doctrine of the immaculate conception is based on a (willful?) mistranslation of Isaiah. The original Hebrew says the messiah will be born to a 'young woman,' but we wind up with 'virgin.' Another fine example is Jerome and Tertullian creating doctrine from abysmal Latin translations.

Even though 'The Closing of the Western Mind' doesn't live up to the promise of its central argument (and Mr. Freeman admits as much in the epilogue), I'd still recommend it to anyone interested in the complicated relationship between the historical Jesus, the Gospels, Paul, Judaism, the Roman Empire, the Greek intellectual tradition and what would become the Roman Catholic Church.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Greek empiricism and belief in reason were slowly eclipsed by Christian faith and church authority as it took over the failing Roman Empire. The sunshine of reason can be overshadowed for centuries by authoritarian obscurantism that can last 1000 years. If we think the sunshine we have in the west can't be snuffed out take a look around you. Otherworldly cravings have an allure which can seem more important than worldly reason. The forces of faith and fanaticism can win with a few well fought battles and darkness can descend.

Ray Francis says

Christianity in 4th and 5th centuries had big problems: riven within by doctrinal disputes, disagreements about what implementing the Christian message meant, and on the outside political domination and interference from the Roman and Byzantine emperors. The famous councils of the time (such as Ephesus, Nicea, Chalcedon) tried to address these issues, but did so poorly. As the empire's grip on the Western part of the continent weakened, the stresses between what eventually became the Orthodox church in the east and the Roman Catholic church in the west led to a split that remains today. The western church suffered further problems: the texts it used (in Latin) came from poorly translated Greek. The early great thinkers of the Church (Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome among others) worked with poor quality texts. Jerome (famed for fluency in many languages) did much to try to fix this problem, but wound up being loathed in his own time for his troubles.

Looking at this problem led to looking more closely at the basic texts to see why there are so many doctrinal conflicts in early Christian thought. And the problems only increased from there: the first gospels (Mark or Matthew, depending upon whose analysis you take) did not appear until some time in the 2nd century). Which means that Paul wrote all of his influential work without any benefit of the gospels in written form. Additionally, Paul wrote his letters to communities for specific purposes in his specific time. Interestingly, none of the Christian communities survived long after Paul's death. Those place later became re-

Christianized many years later. So the foundational documents of Christianity come from disparate sources, say different things, and support different objectives. The only solution the early church fathers could find was to seek recourse in faith. The other prevailing tradition in the area was Greek rational study. The church decided to make empirical thought, reasoned argument, and conclusions based on evidence its enemy. From the 5th century to Thomas Aquinas (himself considered heretical until just before his canonization in the 13th century), the church in both east and west made itself an enemy to other forms of thought in order to quell its own contradictions and conflicts and make it a better instrument of wielding political power.

The results of these approaches affect modern politics and religious thought today, and Freeman makes a very well researched and compelling case for how the closing of the western mind made for a lost era of human achievement of nearly 1500 years.

Tim says

This book is a horrible travesty of historical reporting, but let me quote theologian David Bentley Hart who says it so well and with an appropriate amount of snark.

"Freeman's is the old familiar story that Christianity is somehow to be blamed for a sudden retrogression in Western civilization that set back the cause of human progress by, say, a thousand years. Along the way, Freeman provides a few damning passages from the church fathers (always out of context and without any mention of the plentiful counterexamples found in the same authors), attempts long discourses on theological disputes he simply does not understand, continually falls prey to vulgar misconstruals of the materials he is attempting to interpret, makes large claims about early Christian belief that are simply false, offers vague assertions about philosophers he clearly has not studied, and delivers himself of opinions regarding Christian teaching that are worse than simply inaccurate." Hart has even more to say about Freeman's limited understanding of the history of natural science, but I will stop for now. (from Atheist Delusions, Yale University Press, 2009)

Rob says

Best sentence of this 430 page book: "History suggests that conflicts between religions tend to be more destructive than those between scientists!"

Willowwind says

A meticulously constructed discussion of how the rise of orthodox Christianity as a means of imposing social control in the crumbling Roman Empire led to the suppression of the classical tradition of rational and empirical inquiry, supplanting reason with faith. The result was a centuries long retreat from scientific discovery in Western culture, the effects of which we still feel today in the inability of many segments of the population to process scientific knowledge in favor of revealed belief. Freeman is scrupulously fair to the philosophers whose works he discusses, detailing both their strengths and weaknesses. Yet is it clear that the Christian philosophers like Augustine and Jerome come across as those whose works were significantly

impacted by their personal instabilities while the pagan philosophers of the earlier period(such as Aristotle and Epicurus) are notably less emotionally disturbed. Those unfamiliar with the history of the early church may well be surprised at the degree to which imperial politics shaped Christian doctrine in ways that had nothing to do with either the life and work of Jesus or with anything resembling historical fact. This is a work of fine scholarship, judicious and detailed, as well as copiously notated. It is clear, however, that Freeman feels that the triumph of faith was a tragedy for the development of western culture. It represents, he concludes, the complete abdication of the power to think for oneself in favor of letting external authority dictate what is known and not known. I highly recommend this book to anyone whose inquiry into the development of western culture is sincere and independent.

Rob Atkinson says

I found this more of a duty than a pleasure to read, but it does lay out the intellectual climate in the waning days of the Roman Empire more completely than any of the more general histories of the period I've read (such as the excellent "How Rome Fell: Death of an Empire" by Adrian Goldsworthy). It's essential reading for those who are interested in the end of the Classical tradition and the birth of the Medieval mindset in those turbulent days, and the role that the Empire's official adoption of Christianity played in that transition. That said, many lay readers are likely to find the intricacies of theological debate in the third to fifth centuries a fairly heavy slog, and these disputes make up the greatest share of the book. I would have appreciated more on the embattled last representatives of the pagan cults and classical philosophy to balance out the account, but perhaps the record is scant due to suppression of these 'heresies'; apparently many of the fathers of the church were enthusiastic book-burners. One of the last great thinkers in the old tradition, the brilliant female mathematician Hypatia of Alexandria, was actually herself torn to pieces by a Christian mob. Amidst sectarian riots and vituperative charges of heresy made by bishops against bishops, Christian orthodoxy was gradually imposed by imperial fiat in an attempt to restore order, and dissenting theological opinion of any sort became dangerous to express. Most everything pre-Christian was regarded as pagan, and therefore anathema, excepting a narrow form of Platonism which was made useful in formulating Christian doctrine. A thousand year long tradition of rational inquiry, argument and experiment in philosophy and the natural sciences effectively ceased.
Fortunately for posterity, the Islamic invaders who conquered the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain soon thereafter were tolerant and included some deep and rational thinkers; they recognized the brilliance of the Greek tradition and saved many pre-Christian works since lost to the West, even making their own significant contributions to them over the centuries. Not until Thomas Aquinas' Scholasticism began to reconcile faith with objective reasoning in the early 13th century -- nearly another thousand years later -- would the Church begin to loosen its stranglehold on philosophy and science, allowing the surviving Greco-Roman intellectual legacy to re-enter Europe, in new Latin translations from the Arabic.

Mike Clinton says

Freeman does a fine job of balancing the history of ideas and institutions with human stories of the events that influenced them. He has a thesis composed of several elements woven together to historicize the emergence of Christian thought during the transitional period between the late classical and the early medieval eras. He examines how the configuration of power, ideas, and historical actors produced a culture that privileged faith and renounced empirical rational thought, effectively distancing medieval Christianity from a robust and diverse heritage of classical ideas that had contributed to its early articulation. Freeman

reaches back to the origins of the Greek rational tradition, examining various tensions within it, especially that between Plato and Aristotle; analyzes the dynamic interaction between culture and authority in the Greek, Hellenistic, Roman-Byzantine, and early medieval contexts; retells the story of Christianity's origins from a historicist perspective; depicts the various conflicts over critical theological questions that characterized a multifarious Christian world; and briefly but pointedly draws a contrast with Islamic monotheism, a tradition that more easily reconciled itself to the varieties of classical thought without compromising its spiritual integrity. He successfully explains the development of Christian thought and culture as the outcome of human events and worldly forces rather than the absolute truth of divine revelation and does so engagingly and compellingly.

Andrea says

Loved this. The author does a great job of tracing the threads of classical philosophy and inquiry from their Greek foundations and seeing how they grew and were co-opted, altered, and suppressed throughout the political and religious turmoil of the late Roman empire and the early Middle Ages. The path is not a straightforward one; in the epilogue, he comments, "It is simplistic to talk of the Greek tradition of rational thought being suppressed by Christians." Rather, he stresses the way the Church interacted with and was influenced by imperial politics, and the consequences these interactions had for both political policy and Church doctrine.

The discussions of philosophy and theology are woven through a surprisingly thorough, albeit brief, history of the Greek and Roman empires, as well as the early Church and some of its foundational thinkers. I found this very helpful since I came in with a fairly surface-level knowledge of the topics (the standard one chapter each on the Greeks, the Romans, and the Middle Ages in 10th grade World History, plus the *totally*-unbiased-you-guys Catholic-school version of Church history). A Classics major might get bored here from time to time, but for the interested layman, I think it's a good level of information.

Dan says

My rating notwithstanding, this is a pretty good book. What it's not, though, is a book about how Christianity stifled intellectual thought in the western world. It's more a history of the development of orthodox Christianity (in a Nicene sense). And it's a good one. Just not what I was praying for.

Markham Anderson says

I actually stopped reading this halfway through. It was not for religious offense; I don't take that sort of offense.

Writing like this troubles me because the people I observe reading and acclaiming it are those who consider themselves intelligent, and yet it appears to me that they let themselves be completely persuaded by the writing, which I find insufficiently cogent.

As with Cahill's book, I was enrapt with the relation of the history, but I found the analysis so distasteful. The author repeatedly asserted interpretations or explanations which were not adequately defended, failing to

address alternative explanations which occurred to me as more probable. Having done research elsewhere on the matters of concern, I was yet not able to rule out my alternative ideas, so I do not suppose that he assumed his readers would already have enough background knowledge to see that his conclusions were the correct ones.

(One thing of little significance but great annoyance was that he used one of the highly derivative versions of the Bible for his quotations--one of those ultra modern translated-from-an-earlier-English-version affairs, which butchers the language and distorts semantics terribly. If his readers were incapable of following the English in the *KJV*, that's perhaps an indication that he's reaching for a not-so-acute audience.)

Erik Graff says

I was loaned this book by an old friend who at that time was a professor of the classics at Loyola University Chicago. Raised a Catholic in St. Louis and having gone to school at Holy Cross and Loyola as a student, first, of astronomy and then of the classics, he was--and is--not very sympathetic to Christianity. Indeed, he is downright hostile. The Closing of the Western Mind, a learned screed against the Church with an intentional reference to Bloom's infamous best seller of similar title, pleased him greatly enough to want to share the pleasure of it.

My own background was pretty much areligious. Mom was a nominal member of the Church of Norway, but except for some months in a Lutheran Sunday school with my best friend Larry Nolden around fourth grade, I was pretty ignorant of the whole religion business. And indeed, to the credit of our Sunday school teacher, attendance at basement classes while Larry's parents worshipped upstairs served more as an introduction to comparative world religions than as indoctrination. Dad, however, announced himself an unapologetic atheist when I finally got around to asking him about his own beliefs. Nobody in the family was religious so far as I could discern and when church was attended it was more for the sake of Norwegian tradition than an expression of any ideology. Basically, no one cared much one way or the other. My brother and I were free to attend any services we liked without criticism. Later, brother Fin, following in my footsteps, got involved in his best friend's church, a Greek orthodox one.

The world around us, however, seemed quite religious, quite Christian in fact, and when we moved from a rural housing development to upscale Park Ridge, Illinois, it seemed almost entirely Protestant and often evangelical--and Republican--at that.

Having had friends of all faiths--and races--while living in the country, the move to Park Ridge in fifth grade was quite upsetting. There I was introduced not only to Protestant enthusiasm, but also to anti-Catholicism, class prejudice and racism. There were Catholics in town, but they had their own schools and virtually their own neighborhoods. By high school, a disproportionate number of my friends were of Catholic backgrounds, though those who still "believed" were quite selective in their beliefs.

By the end of the sixties the New Left had penetrated even Park Ridge, many of my older friends being socialists of one sort or another. With the left also came the appeal of the broader counterculture, many peers and younger friends being freaks of one sort or another. Between the two groups, the political and the apolitical, there was much interaction, much openness. It was from among their number and from a freshman History of Civilization course taught by Kelly Fox that I became exposed to and increasingly interested in non-Western religions.

The first two years of college were devoted to study and politics, the politics often pushing the academics aside. Then, having to drop out for a year while facing draft evasion charges, I found myself with the time to read what I wanted. Thinking my character could use a lot of improvement and having had some rather challenging experiences with psychotropics led me towards the serious study of continental depth psychology and the works of C.G. Jung--a psychiatrist who seemed to know a lot about altered states of consciousness and to care a lot about religion.

Returning to college to find the politics now more subdued and inspired by my independent studies, I started taking psychology courses and even a two semester sequence on the bible taught by the Grinnell College chaplain. Dennis Haas, the bible professor, managed to get me enthusiastic about the new Religious Studies Department and to switch to that from the History Department, a change that led me to go straight to Union Theological Seminary in New York upon graduation.

Although the Religious Studies major in college and the subsequent M.Div. did not serve to make a Christian of me, they give me a bit of expertise and an abiding interest in the antique world and religions in general and in Christianity in particular. Consequently, Jim's recommendation of Freeman was well taken and the book thoroughly enjoyed.

This does not, however, mean that I buy into Freeman's arguments entirely. The ideology of Christianity need not be seen as inherently authoritarian, though its alliance with such a state in the fourth century has had that consequence.

Now my stepbrother has walked in for a planned dinner to be eaten together, so this will have to stop...

Þróndr says

Freeman’s main thesis revolves around the politization of Christianity in the late Roman empire and how monotheism eventually became an imperial tool. Regarding Constantine, he writes: “Outside Eusebius’ Life, there is virtually no evidence that suggests that Constantine knew anything much about Christ or even of the requirements for Christian living. His main concern may rather have been to ensure that the growing Christian communities supported his imperial rule, but, shrewd political leader that he was, he also carefully maintained his relationship with paganism to a degree that Eusebius was unwilling to admit.” (p. 155) He also notes that the battle of the Milvian Bridge both provided “rationale for his support for Christianity” as well as “creating a false link between Christianity and success in war that was subsequently integrated into the Christian tradition.” Freeman notes that the latter also attests to Constantine’s lack of knowledge of Christianity (or, it could be added, perhaps his deliberate manipulation of the event for his own purposes.) Drawing on H. A. Drake (1995, 2000) he argues that “It was a mark of Constantine’s political genius and flexibility that he realized it was better to utilize a religion that already had a well-established structure of authority as a prop to the imperial regime rather than exclude it as a hindrance. Drake argues that this idea of integrating rather than rejecting Christians may have grown in Constantine’s mind as the failure of the persecutions became obvious, and that he used the victory at the Milvian Bridge as a platform from which to launch his new policy.” (p. 158)

Covering a period from (loosely) around 800 BCE (Homer) up until the 13th century, it is provides a sweeping overview of the birth, decline (or katabasis) and reascent of the rational tradition in Western civilization. The main theme is the clash between the Christian/Hebraic assertion of revelation versus the accomplishments in classical Greece in the fields of logic, mathematics and inductive reasoning. I found the

strongest part of the book to be the period from late antiquity, from around the fourth to the sixth century, covering the areas of imposition of orthodoxy and the suppression of rational thought, and his discussion of the adoption of neoplatonism by Christian theologians, and also of Arianism and the many doctrinal disputes e.g. about the Trinity, which are lucidly written. For me the first part of the book, dealing with classical Greece onwards felt a bit redundant, and could perhaps have been shortened, but it soon picks up pace when he gets into the discussion proper and held my interest all through the book. Freeman writes fluently and provides a wealth of information throughout, also in the notes.

Eusebius wrote: “The bishop of one city was attacking the bishop of another . . . populations were rising up against each other, and were all but coming to physical blows, so that desperate men, out of their minds, were committing sacrilegious acts, even daring to insult the images of the emperors.” Addressing a group of bishops some years later, Constantine vented his own exasperation at their squabbles: “Even the barbarians now through me, the true servant of God [sic], know God and have learned to reverence him while you [the bishops] do nothing but that which encourages discord and hatred and, to speak frankly, which leads to the destruction of the human race.”...” This quotation is also from Drake – Freeeman in a note adds that “One dispute between rival bishops in Ancyra in Galatia was described (to a synod of bishops meeting in Africa in 343) as follows: ‘Houses were burned down and all manner of fighting broke out. Priests were dragged naked to the forum by the bishop himself . . . he profaned the sacred Host of the Lord by hanging it openly and in public from the necks of priests, and with horrendous barbarity tore the vestments from holy virgins dedicated to God and Christ, and displayed them naked before the public in the forum, in the middle of the city.’...” – The picture is surely a bit different than that sometimes presented of “pious” Christians triumphing over a “decadent” pagan empire..

Constantine found himself embroiled in the Arian controversy, which led to him calling the council in Nicaea. The suggested creed that avoided clashing with Arius did not win favor with the assembly, and it is uclear why the creed of the Son being consubstantial (homoousios) with the Father, finally won out. Freeman suggests that Constantine possibly “forced the formula through in the hope of quelling the dispute” – meaning also that he didn’t really care so much what was decided but rather that the squablling of the bishops come to an end, siding with what he may have sensed to be the majority view. Or it could have been a tactical move (focus on God, not Christ) and here Freeman quotes Alistair Kee: “Christ had no part in the religion of Constantine.” – But the creed was not much in effect until the Council of Constantinople in 381. “As Jaroslav Pelikan puts it in his study of the making of Christian doctrine, “[Other than Arius and the exiled bishops] all the rest saluted the emperor, signed the formula and went on teaching as they always had.” He continues: “In the case of most of them, this meant a doctrine of Christ somewhere between that of Arius and that of Alexander.”...” Constantine later also moved towards reconciliation with the Arians, and when he was baptized on his death bed, it was by an Arian bishop.

The privileges and tax exemption had been give only to “the adherents of the Catholic [e.g., ‘correct’] faith.” “This,” writes Freeman, “explains why the emperors came to play such a large part in the determining of doctrine, although their roles varied... By the end of the century emperors were imposing doctrinal solutions that were backed by imperial edicts.” Constantine’s heir Constantius championed a different creed, using the term “like [homoios] the Father,” then a group of bishops proposed the formula homoiousios, “of similar substance,” (Gibbon would later quip about this “furious contests over a single diphthong.”) Constantius’ terminology was used in what has been called the Dated Creed, which was finally pushed through at a council in 360 at Constantinople. Then things changed when Julian came to power: “Summoning the bishops, he ordered them “to allow every man to practise his belief boldly without hindrance.” The clergy lost all their exemptions, and in 362 they were forbidden to teach rhetoric or grammar. It was absurd, declared Julian, for Christians to teach classical culture while at the same time pouring scorn on classical religion—if they wished to teach, they should confine themselves to teaching the Gospels in their churches.”

(p. 183)

Meanwhile, the anti-Arian and pro-Nicene bishops consolidated under this liberal regime, and this cause, championed by e.g. Athanasius of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers (who now denounced Constantius as anti-Christ), and later by Ambrose in Milan. Of the Valentinian dynasty that followed Julian, Theodosius emerged as pro-Nicene, and the Council of Constantinople in 380 “was the moment when the Nicene formula became part of the official state religion (if only for the moment in the eastern empire). All those Christians who differed from it—Homoeans, Homoiousians, Arians and a host of other minor groups—were declared to be heretics facing not only the vengeance of God but also that of the state. The decision of Constantine to privilege one Christian community over another was consolidated in that a “truth” was now defined and enforced by law, with those declared heretical to be punished on earth as well as by God. It was unclear on what basis this “truth” rested, certainly not one of exclusively rational argument, so it either had to be presented as “the revelation of God,” as it was by Thomas Aquinas, or accepted that “truth” was as defined by the emperor.” - “In effect, the edict finally confirmed the emperor as the definer and enforcer of orthodoxy. In the future, when debates within the church began to get out of hand and threaten the stability of the empire, it would be the emperor who would intervene to establish the boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy. This was not simply a theological issue. “Orthodoxy” was now associated with tax exemptions for clergy as well as access to wealth and patronage and the high status enjoyed by the state church, while “heretics” lost all these.” (p. 194)

“Theodosius used orthodoxy as a focus for loyalty to the empire, so, for instance, the devastating defeat of Valens was reinterpreted as the judgment of God effected through the hand of those, the Goths, “whom he [Valens] had perfidiously led astray when they had sought the true faith, turning them aside from the flame of love into the fire of hell,” that is, by initiating them into the Homoean Christianity they sustained after 381. Every subsequent attack by the Goths on the empire could be characterized as the assault of evil on the true faith. It is possible to see the rise of Christian intolerance as essentially a defensive response to these threats.” (p. 195) However, Valentinian, emperor in the west 375–92, remained Homoean, and “the majority of the population in Constantinople were not Nicenes and were outraged when they lost their churches..” (p. 195) “[T]he debate over the scriptures rumbled on. For example, the Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum ... preserved among the papers of John Chrysostom and probably originating from a beleaguered Homoean community in early fifth-century Illyria, claimed to represent “true” Christianity, now being persecuted by “false” (orthodox) Christians. The distinguishing mark of this community, the writer stresses, is its fidelity to scripture. The Homoean Goths were noted for their reliance on the scriptures.” (p. 197)

I have been dealing extensively with this part of Freeman’s book because it is so central to his thesis. In subsequent chapters Freeman deals with the role of bishops and Ambrose of Milan in particular, and also the program of building lavish churches, a tradition begun with Constantine who adopted the basilica: “Adapting to this newfound opulence was a major challenge to the church.” (p. 207) Freeman stresses the imperial themes for Christian iconography: “Sabine MacCormack [1981] notes how once Christ was represented with such imperial imagery the emperors ceased to make use of it: “Once an image of majesty had been applied to Christ it was impossible to apply it again to the emperor.” So the process by which Christ becomes integrated into the iconography of imperial government continued.” (p. 208) “[T]he allure of churches was further enhanced by the practice of bringing martyrs’ bones and other relics to them, or ... of building churches over their supposed burial places.” (p. 210) There was a wide-spread belief in the miracle-working properties of martyr’s bones, and even “Augustine, who had been sceptical of the power of relics, was won over on their [the bones alleged to have belonged to St Stephen] arrival at Hippo.”

In a chapter dealing with ascesis, Freeman writes that “when Christians turned towards asceticism they were taking a path that was not in itself remarkable, but there were nevertheless elements of Christian asceticism

that took it well beyond mere conventional restraint, often into a realm of obsessive intensity." (p. 235) "Paul laid down one of the foundational statements of Christian asceticism as essentially a battle between the unworthy self and sin/demons when he wrote in Romans 7:18–20, "The fact is I know of nothing good living in me— living, that is, in my unspiritual self—for though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not . . . when I act against my will, then, it is not my true self doing it, but sin which lives in me." Asceticism is necessary to strengthen the will against the onslaught of demons (or "sin"), and the battle is better prepared for if the body, and the will, are trained." Not all approved of asceticism however: "It involved a reversal of the values of society, a rejection of traditional statuses and even a threat, some feared, through mass virginity, to the survival of humanity itself." (p. 237-40)

Freeman also has some interesting comments on how the role of women changed when also they enter monasteries or simply "adopted a view of perpetual virginity" – further, on the cult of Mary: "The cult took its strength from the need for a symbol of female virginity, and its power is evident in the way the interpretation of the scriptures was distorted to support it. Jerome, in his commentary on Isaiah, even went so far as to argue that here if nowhere else the Septuagint version was superior to the original Hebrew, and Jesus' brothers and sisters were now recast as "cousins," "brethren" or even children of Joseph by an earlier marriage. Once the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity was accepted as unassailable, it was possible for Augustine, for instance, to develop the argument that Jesus had been born of a virgin so as to escape the taint of sin which would have been absorbed if the sexual act was involved—an approach which only served to reinforce Augustine's view that those conceived in the normal way were corrupted by sin. This concern with the physical elements of Mary's virginity became so intense that it was even argued that she gave birth without losing her virginity. Once again Jerome produced an appropriate verse in support, in the prophet Ezekiel: "This gate will be kept shut. No one will open it to go through it, since Yahweh the God of Israel has been through it, and so it must be kept shut" (44:2). Doctrinally, the cult reached its climax with the declaration that Mary was Theotokos, Mother of God (still her preferred title in the eastern church), which was proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus in 431." (p. 242)

"Yet, and this is important, asceticism reflected and reinforced an intense preoccupation with the individual self that was to become central to the Christian experience. Plato talked of the essential struggle between the soul and the desires of the body, but he does not involve himself personally in it. It is one of the marks of his greatness as a philosopher that he distances himself from the debate through the medium of dialogues, often using Socrates as a representative of his views. So it is possible to engage with Platonism intellectually rather than emotionally; there can be no sense of guilt, certainly no fear of eternal punishment, deriving from disagreement with Plato. The Stoics similarly made no heavy emotional demands on their audiences, because they did not see the achievement of "goodness" as a major challenge. Seneca put it in terms similar to Epictetus (p. 236 above): "The body requires many things for health, the soul nourishes itself [sic] . . . Whatever can make you good is in your power. What do you need in order to be good? To will it." Paul, by contrast, both dramatizes the struggle and entangles it in the complexities of his own personality. "What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?" (Romans 7:24). While the answer lies in the death and resurrection of Christ, this did not appear to release committed Christians from a continuing process of struggle. Ambrose echoes him: "Greater danger lies not in attacks from outside, but from within ourselves. Inside us is the adversary, inside is the author of error, inside us I say, closed up within our very selves . . . it proceeds not from nature but from our own wills." - It is hard to find a Christian of the period who has found serenity, and the most committed, Jerome and Augustine, for instance, appear to be the most tortured. ... There is no more revealing account of the struggle within than Augustine's Confessions, where he battles to come to peace with a God who pries into his innermost thoughts. One can never know whether one is truly saved. .... The only true way to secure a rest from tension on earth is to escape completely from the exercise of moral responsibility; here the "virtue" of obedience becomes crucial. William James, in his celebrated study The Varieties of Religious Experience, makes the point, quoting the

response of a Jesuit: ‘One of the great consolations of the monastic life is the assurance that we have that in obeying we can commit no fault. The Superior may commit a fault in commanding you to do this or that, but you are certain that you commit no fault so long as you obey, because God will only ask you if you have duly performed what orders you received . . . The moment what you did was done obediently, God wipes it out of your account and charges it to the Superior [sic!] . . . So that Saint Jerome well exclaimed, “Oh, holy and blessed security by which one becomes almost impeccable.’ Here the abdication of the power to think for oneself is complete” (pp. 249-50)

“Because the writings of John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine were preserved and given such status, and because the church and its teachings became so deeply embedded in the legal and political system, it is easy to regard Christianity as much more powerful at this stage than it really was. ... While in the legislation of the period one sees an intensification of the Christian state, this did not necessarily mean that the subjects of the empire became orthodox Christians—or even Christians at all. ... The sheer breadth of the empire, the need for the remaining pagan elites to be wooed rather than alienated by the embattled emperors and the diversity and remoteness of many of its communities meant that much remained untouched. The traditional approach to the late empire by Christian historians, which suggests that paganism had somehow lost its force and “deserved” to succumb, underestimates its depth and resilience.” (p. 263) - “By the end of the century gifts or bequests to temples were forbidden altogether, resulting in a natural atrophy as buildings fell into disrepair. The process was hastened by deliberate destruction. The archaeologist finds signs of Christian iconoclasm everywhere: the cutting out of phalluses of Amun on Egyptian temples, the carving of crosses on pagan statues, the erasure of the inscriptions of gods’ names, bathhouses that have lost their function (bathing naked was condemned) and have a cross at the door or have been converted into churches, the breaking up or melting down of statues. The quality of what was destroyed can sometimes be gauged only by what little has survived—the magnificent bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius on horse-back... which remained intact only because it was mistakenly believed to be of Constantine.” (p. 267)
(continued below in comment -->)