

most deplorable sort, justly tortured, condemned, and executed for their crimes, but glorified after death as martyrs of the faith, their abominable relics venerated in place of the old gods.

The scandal of the pagans, however, was the glory of the church. Vincent of Lérins, in the early fifth century, celebrated the severe moral tutelage of the monasteries in his native Gaul precisely because it was so corrosive of class consciousness: it taught the sons of the aristocracy humility, he said, and shattered in them the habits of pride, vanity, and luxuriance. It is arguable that, during the second century, the legal and social disadvantages of the lower classes under Rome had grown even more onerous than they had been in previous centuries, and that the prejudices of class had become even more pronounced than they had been in the Hellenistic or earlier Roman world. During this same period, however, Christians not only preached but even occasionally realized, something like a real community of souls, transcendent of all natural or social divisions. Not even the most morally admirable of the pagan philosophical schools, Stoicism, succeeded so strikingly in making a spiritual virtue of indifference to social station. The very law of the church was an inversion of “natural” rank: for Christ had promised that the first would be last and the last first. The *Didascalia*, for instance, prescribed that a bishop ought never to interrupt his service to greet a person of high degree who had just entered the church, lest he—the bishop—be seen to be a respecter of persons; but, on seeing a poor man or woman enter the assembly, that same bishop should do everything in his power to make room for the new arrival, even if he himself should have to sit upon the floor to do so. The same text also makes it clear that the early church might often have arranged its congregations into different groups, distinguished by age, sex, marital status, and so on, simply for propriety’s sake, but that social degree was not the standard by which one’s place was assigned among “the brethren.”² Men of high attainment—literate, accomplished, propertied, and free—had to crowd in among slaves, laborers, and craftsmen, and count it no disgrace.

I do not wish to exaggerate the virtues of the early Christians on this count. Perfection is not to be found in any human institution, and the church has certainly always been that. Even in the early days of the church, certain social distinctions proved far too redoubtable to exterminate; a Christian slaveholder’s Christian slaves were still slaves, even if they were also their master’s brothers in Christ. And, after Constantine, as

the church became that most lamentable of things—a pillar of respectable society—it learned all too easily to tolerate many of the injustices it supposedly condemned. The enfranchised church has never been more than half Christian even at the best of times; often enough, it has been much less than that. Neither, however, should we underestimate how extraordinary the religious ethos of the earliest Christians was in regard to social order, or fail to give them credit for the attempts they did make to efface the distinctions in social dignity which had traditionally separated persons of different rank from one another, but which had been (they believed) abolished in Christ. When all is said and done, the pagan critics of the early church were right to see the new faith as an essentially subversive movement. In fact, they may have been somewhat more perspicacious in this regard than the Christians themselves. Christianity may never have been a revolution in the political sense: it was not a convulsive, violent, or intentionally provocative faction that had some “other vision” of political power to recommend; but neither, for that reason, was the change it brought about something merely local, transient, and finite. The Christian vision of reality was nothing less than—to use the words of Nietzsche—a “transvaluation of all values,” a complete revision of the moral and conceptual categories by which human beings were to understand themselves and one another and their places within the world. It was—again to use Nietzsche’s words, but without his sneer—a “slave revolt in morality.” But it was also, as far as the Christians were concerned, a slave revolt “from above,” if such a thing could be imagined; for it had been accomplished by a savior who had, as Paul said in his Epistle to the Philippians, willingly exchanged the “form of God” for the “form of a slave,” and had thereby overthrown the powers that reigned on high.

Perhaps even more striking than the episode of Peter’s tears—at least, in regard to its cultural setting—is the story of Christ before Pilate, especially as related in the Gospel of John. Again, an immense historical distance intervenes between us and the age in which the text was produced; and, again, the moral meaning of the scene is one to which most of us today are prepared, at least emotionally, to assent; so we cannot quite *feel* its strangeness, or the novelty of its metaphysical implications. To its earliest readers, however, what could such a scene have meant? On one side of the tableau stands a man of noble birth, invested with the full authority