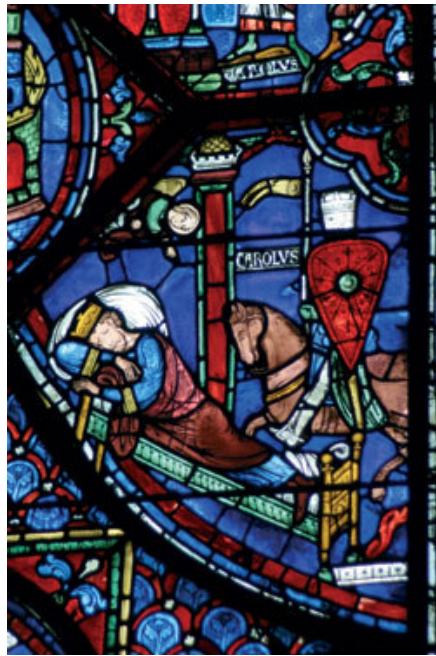


# Messiahs!

## Rulers and the Role of Religion



*In this new series we will examine, throughout history, the desire of some men to become savior-gods and the proclivity of people to move toward them and support them, thereby giving legitimacy to their rule and encouragement to their fantasies of omnipotence. We will also see that religion is all too often harnessed and manipulated in the pursuit of such deification. Those who pretend at godhood, or who simply use it as a political device, often claim for themselves a unique anointing, the status of superman, or the ability to create supreme law. In their delusions, they become mistaken messiahs.*

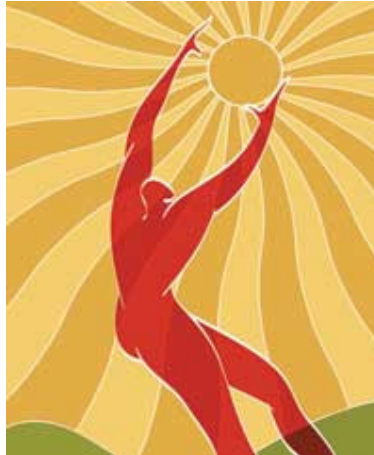
(extracted from Vision magazine, [www.vision.org](http://www.vision.org))

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## PART 1

### Men as Gods



**Men who delight in playing god until they become a god have long been part of human society, and often at the leadership level**

When toward the end of his rule the debauched Roman emperor Nero (54–68 C.E.) opposed the building of a temple to himself as a divine being, he seemed to contradict the prevailing social order. Emperor worship had become part of everyday Roman life, and his own progress toward such exaltation seemed to be accelerating. Was Nero's refusal a sign that humility had at last come to the pompous and cruel ruler?

It seems not, on several counts. Nero's stated reason for refusal was the accepted belief that only dead emperors could achieve divinity. But already 10 years earlier, he had allowed the Senate to erect an equal-sized statue of himself alongside the god of war in the temple of the Avenging Mars. Further, coins from his reign depict him with the radiate crown of a deified emperor, and as Apollo, the sun god.

If that were not enough to demonstrate the emperor's fascination with divinity (whether he really thought he was divine or just pretended at it), events surrounding the visit to Rome of Tiridates, king of Armenia, should convince the skeptic. Tiridates was also a Parthian magus, a priest of Mithra. His surrender to Roman forces had allowed him to retain his throne as a vassal king, but it was as a magus that Tiridates intrigued Nero, who looked upon him as a magician. And Nero loved magic. To add to the fascination, Mithra was the god of light and was therefore often identified with the sun. When the Armenian king visited Nero in the year 66, he knelt and addressed the emperor as "master" and "god." At that point, apparently, Nero indeed viewed himself in terms approaching divinity. According to third-century Roman senator and historian Dio Cassius, Nero told the king, "You have done well to come here in person, so that by meeting me face-to-face you might enjoy my grace. . . . I have the power to take away kingdoms and to bestow them" (Roman History 63.5.3). Soon after, in a lavish and carefully orchestrated public ceremony, the priest of the god of light repeated his words of homage as the rising sun shone on Nero's face and made him, to all appearances, the new god of the sun.

Despite the fact that he was probably more interested in the gods ideologically than religiously, there is no question that Nero had an obsession with the sun. From his identification with Apollo the Lyre Player, god of music, to the invincible Sol, god of racing, to Phoebus Apollo, the charioteer of the sun, Nero became a multitype of the sun god in his lifetime. By the year 60 he was a divine lyre player, singer and chariot racer with golden hair. He initiated a Golden Age. He was the New Apollo and Sol, wearing a diadem with rays rising from it. And yet he was also of the people, shunning divinity, performing in plays, singing in public.

In his sometimes ambivalent opinions about divinity, Nero was not so unusual, for his Roman predecessors and his imperial successors did similar things: they would both shun and claim divinity. The thread of adulation runs throughout, both as a need for the ruled and as a temptation for the ruler.

### **TRACING CLAIMS TO DIVINITY**

Roman emperor worship, or the celebration of the imperial cult, had its beginnings with Julius Caesar (46–44 B.C.E.), who had learned it from the Greeks. The Greeks in turn had absorbed the idea from the Egyptians and the Babylonians. Caesar sought legitimacy for his ambition of attaining lifetime rulership by claiming a divine origin for himself. His mistake was to suggest that while still alive, he be worshiped as a god, a descendant of the goddess Venus. Such display of hubris, combined with Roman aristocratic ambition, led to his assassination at the hand of a group led by Brutus and Cassius, members of the Senate.

But it was not long before Julius Caesar's desire for divinity was rewarded. His nephew and adopted son Octavian, who eventually became Caesar Augustus (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), proclaimed his father Divus Iulius (divine Julius), built a temple to him, and placed his statue among the Roman gods of antiquity in the Pantheon of Agrippa. Augustus denied Roman Italy the right to accord himself the divine honors that he bestowed on his father, however, openly saying that he was not a god. Nevertheless, he allowed his Egyptian subjects to recognize him as such and permitted the construction of temples in his name in the Eastern empire. In these areas remote from Italy, he became known as "savior" and "benefactor," worthy of worship.

Augustus's successor, Tiberius (14–37), was reluctant to accept deification for himself, though he readily granted it to his predecessor, referring to him as "the divine Augustus." Nonetheless, during his rule Tiberius appeared as *divus* on some coins and was declared "son of the god" in a document written in 37.

It was the next emperor, Gaius (37–41), also known as Caligula, who would take the ultimate step and demand to be worshiped in Rome. An illness during the early days of his rule seems to have upset Caligula's mental balance. Believing himself to be the incarnation of Jupiter, the father of the gods, he proclaimed himself the embodiment of all previous Roman gods and goddesses and habitually dressed in their garb.

Angered that the Jews in Alexandria would not set up and worship his statue in their synagogues, Caligula instructed his legate in Syria to install his bronze image in the temple in Jerusalem. Though the emperor later rescinded the order, in his megalomania and egocentricity he was not dissimilar to the later Nero. The traits showed themselves in both men in egregious self-promotion and delusions of grandeur.

Men who delight in playing god until they become a god have long been part of human society, and often at the leadership level. Men in political life who use the power of religion to enslave others are not uncommon. What happened several times in the Roman Empire once

the imperial cult was established (see *"Inventing Deities"*), provided an example for later rulers in other social and political orders.

## **BABYLONIAN PARALLEL**

Following Caligula's murder, Claudius became emperor, and he in turn was succeeded by Nero. It is said that toward the end of his reign Nero set up a 120-foot bronze statue of himself as the sun god. While this is a matter of scholarly debate, it does sound like the kind of public work that Nero would have undertaken (see *"Nero's Colossus"*). If he did commission such a statue, he acted in a way strikingly similar to how another ruler in a different time and place had acted. The Bible records that about 650 years earlier Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had erected a 90-foot golden statue on a nearby plain (see Daniel 3). He required all of his subjects to worship the great image on pain of death. What exactly the statue represented is not stated explicitly, though some Bible scholars believe that it was most likely in the form of Nebuchadnezzar himself—a version of what the young Jewish prophet Daniel had revealed when he interpreted the king's dream about an unusual statue made of several elements (see Daniel 2). Daniel had said that the statue's head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian kingdom he ruled. It is not too wild a speculation to suggest that the king's already enormous pride was bolstered by Daniel's interpretation, and now some form of deification became his passion; hence a golden statue of himself, which everyone had to worship. The book of Daniel goes on to show that the king's pride led him to believe that he was responsible for his own success, that he was in some way God's equivalent, for which he suffered seven years of egomaniacal madness (see Daniel 4).

The Babylonian priesthood, which was actually made up of Chaldean magi, had devised a method by which it retained power over the king through religion. A ceremony at the king's investiture emphasized his relationship to the chief Babylonian god, Marduk. The god's image was housed in a temple atop the almost 300-foot-high ziggurat, or stepped tower, in Babylon. As with the earlier biblical Tower of Babel (Greek, Babylon)—see Genesis 11—its builders had the idea of challenging heaven itself by building upward. Inside the temple, the king figuratively received his authority from Marduk by holding the hands of the image. He thus became a son of the god and was obliged to protect the priests. As a result, the Babylonian people had long regarded their king as divine. Evidence of the Babylonian view of the relationship between king and god was found at the excavation site of ancient Babylon in the form of a cuneiform document, which reads in part: "Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, the pious prince appointed by the will of Marduk, the highest priestly prince."

## **FROM BABYLON TO ROME**

The link between the Babylonians, the Greeks and the Romans when it comes to the idea of "men as gods" is a fascinating study into the transmission of ideas across cultures. When the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians in 539 B.C.E., the new rulers were at first tolerant of Babylonian religion and its Chaldean priesthood. But eventually the priests frustrated the Persians, when in an attempt to retain their behind-the-scenes political power, they installed one of their own, a priest posing as the king's brother Smerdis, as ruler of Babylon. The imposter was discovered and killed by the Persians. Following a subsequent revolt when the priests again set up their own Babylonian ruler, the Persian king Xerxes came and destroyed Babylon in 487, tearing down the temples and removing the statue of Marduk.

At this point, around 480, the Babylonian priests are thought to have left the city and reestablished their base elsewhere. According to one source, "the defeated Chaldeans fled to Asia Minor, and fixed their central college at Pergamos, and took the palladium of Babylon, the cubic stone, with them. Here, independent of state control, they carried on the rites of their religion" (William B. Barker, *Lares and Penates: or, Cilicia and Its Governors*,

Ingram, Cooke and Co., London, 1853). Once established in Pergamos, the Babylonians quite naturally set up their religion again. In an article on the god Bel, also known as Marduk, the Anchor Bible Dictionary notes: "It is true that Bel-Marduk must have suffered the degradation of being defeated by the foe, but it is also true that the Persian conqueror dealt kindly with religious concerns so that Bel, though shamed by his impotence in the Babylonian debacle, survived and passed his legacy on to the Hellenistic and Roman world." And so, ancient ways became part of other cultures.

## **THE ROLE OF PERGAMOS**

The early history of the city of Pergamos is somewhat obscure. The Greek historian Xenophon (ca. 428–354 B.C.E.) mentions that sometime after 490 the deposed king of Sparta, Demaratus, became an advisor to Xerxes. Further, he says that the Spartan king's relatives were given land at Pergamos, among other places, perhaps in recognition of Demaratus's service to Xerxes. But the city did not become important until Alexander the Great's conquest of Asia (334–323). With the flourishing of his Greco-Macedonian Empire, Pergamos became a major military and political center.

Was Alexander held captive by the power of the Chaldean religion? Again according to Barker, the Chaldeans at Pergamos "plotted against the peace of the Persian empire, caballing with the Greeks for that purpose. They brought forward Alexander as a divine incarnation, and by their craft did as much as the Greeks by their prowess to overthrow the Persian power" (emphasis added). It is an interesting indication that the Chaldeans did not cease from wielding politico-religious influence, injecting their presence into the next world empire. Significantly, and perhaps in gratitude, Alexander planned to restore Babylon to its greatness, intending to make it his capital. His death there in 323 B.C.E. from fever prevented the fulfillment of his dream. But the idea that a man could become a god was passed on to Alexander and his successors by the Babylonian priests.

In the two centuries that followed, Pergamos increased its prestige, reaching its zenith under the Attalid dynasty. Attalus I concluded an alliance with Rome in 212 B.C.E., and the fortunes of the city were assured for many years. But his descendant Attalus III had no heir, and so he willed the city to the Roman Empire before his death in 133.

Throughout the 350 or so years following the establishment of Pergamos, it seems that the descendants of the Babylonian priesthood maintained their role in the city's religious life. But Bible scholars further indicate that the priests did not make Pergamos their final home. When the city was given to Rome, they sought out the new power center and moved to the Italian peninsula. Within the pagan and later Christianized Roman Empire they were able to continue some of their ancient Chaldean practices.

Was this one of the entry points of the "men as gods" idea, appropriated by the Romans beginning with Julius Caesar? And has the notion that men can become messiahs, using religious rituals and the power of supposed divinity, been carried forward through civilizations since? In Part Two we will continue to explore the march of messiahs through the Roman Empire and beyond.

DAVID HULME

### **Perpetuating the Cult**

The course of the imperial cult from the death of Trajan (117 C.E.) to the coming of the first ostensibly Christian emperor, Constantine (312–337), was marked by sporadic persecution of those subjects who would not participate in emperor worship—particularly Jews and followers of Christ. Though they

were not to be sought out at first, they could be punished if others brought complaints against them. During this period several emperors perpetuated the imperial cult:

- **Hadrian** (117–138) was often associated with the father of the Greek gods, Zeus. A lover of all things Greek, he completed the temple of the Olympian Zeus in Athens at the city's request and was initiated into the Greek mystery religion at Eleusis. Temples and statues celebrated Hadrian, and he was portrayed on coins as divine. Not only did he permit his own worship, he deified his young Egyptian companion Antinous upon the latter's untimely death.

- **Antoninus Pius** (138–161) received the name "Pius" for his act of persuading the Senate to deify Hadrian. Antoninus himself was generally passive toward Christianity. Still, when Polycarp (a disciple of the apostle John and bishop of Smyrna) refused to say to a proconsul "Caesar is lord" and offer incense to the emperor's statue, he was burned to death. After his own death, Antoninus was deified.

- **Marcus Aurelius** (161–180) was a philosopher of the Stoic school. Although he did not actively persecute Christian opponents of emperor worship, their execution was permitted under his rule. Following his death he, too, was deified.

- **Commodus** (180–192) is remembered by historians as a corrupt and cruel man in the mode of Caligula, Nero and Domitian. He demanded divine honors. According to the third-century Roman historian Dio Cassius, he was publicly recognized with a large gold statue. Under Commodus, 12 Christians in North Africa, known to posterity as the Scillitan Martyrs, were beheaded for not swearing their loyalty to him. When a distinguished Roman citizen (perhaps a senator) named Apollonius similarly refused, on the grounds of Christian conscience, to sacrifice to the emperor's image or acknowledge him as "lord Commodus the emperor," he was also beheaded. Commodus seems ultimately to have gone insane, believing that he was the god Hercules and both fighting and dressing as a gladiator. He was murdered and his memory reviled by the Senate.

- **Septimius Severus** (193–211), like most other Roman emperors, was known by the divine title "lord." His wife, Julia Domna, was the daughter of a priest of the cult of the sun at Emesa in Syria and became part of the imperial cult by marriage. Both she and the emperor were deified after their deaths.

- **Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Caesar** (211–217), also known as Caracalla, was one of the most violent Roman rulers. His other nickname, Tarautas, came from a particularly ugly and bloodthirsty gladiator of the time, whom he resembled. Though he tolerated the Jews and the Christians, as a ruler he is said to have considered himself a god and the son or brother of his favorite deity, the Greco-Egyptian sun god Sarapis. He is the only Roman emperor depicted in statue as a pharaoh. His supporters forced his deification on the Senate after his death. Caracalla's successors were Macrinus (217–218), Elagabalus (218–222)—named after a Syrian sun god, whose high priest he was—and Alexander Severus (222–235).

- **Decius** (249–251) was responsible for restoring emperor worship and requiring all citizens to furnish certificates from a temple confirming their compliance. Whether intentional or not, his edict to this effect in 250 brought about the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. Everyone was required to sacrifice to the gods. As a result of their refusal, the bishops of Jerusalem, Antioch and Rome were among those who were killed, and many more were arrested.

- **Valerian** (253–260) ordered the renewing of Decius's persecutions, targeting Christian bishops, presbyters and deacons and requiring them to sacrifice to the gods. In his reign, Cyprian of Carthage and Pope Sixtus II were martyred.

- **Diocletian** (284–305) required that he be called "lord and god" and claimed the personal protection of the Roman chief god, Jupiter. He declared himself and his co-emperor, Maximian, "sons of gods and creators of gods," naming himself Jove/Jupiter and his colleague Hercules. Again the Christians were selected for special attention in an extremely violent persecution. In 303–304 Diocletian published four edicts. Empire-wide, any who did not offer sacrifices were either executed or given

imprisonment with hard labor. When in 312 Constantine became the first emperor to espouse Christianity, it signaled the end of persecution of Christians by Roman emperors.

DAVID HULME

### **The Influence of Babylon, Egypt and Greece**

Emperor worship inherited some of its concepts from the ancient East, where kings were considered sons of the gods. The famous legal code of King Hammurabi (ca. 1792–1750 B.C.E.) of the first dynasty of Babylon contains a description of how the god, the king and the people were bound together. When the king assumed the throne, he derived his authority to rule by grasping the hands of the statue of the god Marduk. The god thus revealed himself to the people through the king, who then became a son of the god, and his rule could not be questioned.

The idea that the ruler was associated with the sun came from Egypt. The ancient Egyptians venerated Re, the sun god, and the Pharaoh was understood to be his son. In effect, the ruler was the inviolable intermediary between the people and their god. The Greeks did not share this view: their gods were much more human and visited people on earth. Further, the rule of their kings was not absolute. But when Alexander the Great visited Egypt, he was welcomed as the son of Amon-Re, the principal Egyptian god. From then on he accepted that he was the son of Zeus, the chief of the gods. Alexander was buried in Alexandria, where he was worshiped as the son of Amon. As his cult spread, temples were erected to his honor throughout Asia Minor. His successors, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, came to believe that they, too, were worthy of veneration.

It was a short step from here to veneration of the conquering Romans when they succeeded the Greeks in ruling the East. Soon temples and statues were built honoring Dea Roma (the goddess Rome), and the stage was set for the blossoming of Roman emperor worship, which proves to have a lengthy pedigree.

### **Nero's Colossus**

Most scholars have claimed that Nero built a huge bronze statue of himself as the sun god and set it up in the vestibule of his famed Golden House (Domus Aurea), the extensive remains of which have been opened recently to the public beneath the streets of Rome. But visitors cannot see the statue: it was destroyed in the fourth century.

What can be known is that the emperor planned to erect a 100- to 120-foot statue of Sol, one of the Roman sun gods. Pliny the Elder (23–79 C.E.) says that the statue was intended to represent Nero, but some scholars have noted that this may be the opinion of the emperor's detractors, who wished to denigrate him after his death. The historians of Nero's time do not unambiguously support the notion that the great image was of the emperor himself, nor indeed that it stood in the Domus Aurea in the time of Nero. The biographer Suetonius, born a few years after Nero's death, is the only one who specifically refers to "a colossal statue of the emperor." But he does not say that such a statue stood in the vestibule; rather, that the space was large enough for one. Pliny actually witnessed the sculptor creating his work, but he does not say that it was finished in Nero's time. Tacitus (ca. 55–120), who was a keen critic of the emperor, makes no mention of the image. Further, third-century historian Dio Cassius records that Vespasian, one of Nero's successors, erected the colossus several years after the latter's death, not in the Domus Aurea but on the Sacred Way.

It is therefore unlikely that Nero ever saw the statue standing in his house.

DAVID HULME



## PART 2

### The Coming of the “Christian” Emperor

*That men should come to think of themselves as gods and use religion to manipulate their followers may seem curious antiquated notions—more akin to the ancient eastern potentates reviewed in Part One, and their pagan priestly powerbrokers. Babylonian rulers, followed by Greek and Roman, certainly indulged in their own versions of the leader cult, with their loyal subjects affording them the adulation each party needed to command or express. But to suggest that the same kind of behavior is possible in the 21st century is to invite skepticism, even disbelief. Surely we no longer live in such superstitious times, and neither rulers nor citizens would suggest the leader cult as a model for enlightened government. Or would they?*

*In Part Two of Messiahs! we examine the life of the emperor Constantine the Great. Again, we discover that some notions of rule and their relation to religion have surprisingly deep roots.*



With his mother, Helena, looking on, Constantine holds a model of the Hagia Sophia church.

During daylight hours of October 27, 312 C.E., Constantine and his 98,000-man army are said to have seen “a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, ‘By this conquer’” (see Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.28). At the end of his life in 337, the emperor told the historian and bishop Eusebius that the next night Christ appeared to him and ordered him to put the sign of the cross on his battle standards. Having done so, he went on to defeat his brother-in-law and coemperor, Maxentius, on October 28 at the battle of the Milvian Bridge, then two miles north of Rome. Constantine seems also to have told this version of the story on Good Friday 325, in a speech now accepted by scholars as authentic, as he explained that he saw himself in history as God’s servant.

Though Constantine had really won the victory a few days earlier in the Po Valley on his way to Rome, his success at the Milvian Bridge has been regarded as a turning point in world history. Soon he was the sole emperor in the West and several years later was able to unite both Western and Eastern parts of the empire and establish a “new Rome” at Constantinople.

More significant in its effect to this day, however, was the favor he bestowed on Christianity, or more accurately the Roman version of the faith. Barely three months after his victory outside Rome, Constantine, along with his coemperor in the East, Licinius, initiated a new religious policy for the Eastern empire. The official statement was issued a few months later by Licinius and is often wrongly referred to as the Edict of Milan. The document, which went out from Nicomedia in western Asia Minor, extended the rights and privileges of Christians in the West (which had been reestablished in stages throughout Constantine’s early years of rulership) to those in the Eastern empire. There would be no more persecution of Christianity, and confiscated properties would be returned to Christian owners.

When Constantine was born, probably around 272 or 273, Roman Christianity was already becoming an accepted religion. In 260 the emperor Gallienus had reversed his father Valerian’s persecutions and declared Christianity a legitimate religion (*religio licita*). Within 40 years there were Roman Christians in the palace, in the army, and in imperial and provincial administration. Nevertheless, in 303 Emperor Diocletian ordered renewed persecution of Christians.

Constantine’s own father, Constantius, was a coemperor in the West at the time. Though not a Christian, he was sympathetic to monotheism—the idea that one supreme god ruled all religious cults. With this background, it is therefore not difficult to understand why Constantine became the defender of the empire’s increasingly popular religion when he came to power in 306. According to Robert M. Grant, “by 312 he had realized how helpful the Christian church could be, and with the aid of a secretary for church affairs he began to intervene in such matters so that he could promote the unity of the church” (“Religion and Politics at the Council of Nicaea,” in *The Journal of Religion*, Volume 55, 1975). That secretary was Hosius, or Ossius, bishop of Cordoba in Spain, who became ecclesiastical advisor to Constantine and seems to have had a strong influence on him.

## CONFLICTING VISIONS

Despite the importance that Constantine’s heavenly vision has assumed, the story has been muddled by seemingly contradictory evidence. Eusebius’s account, quoted above, is from a work usually dated 339. It differs in important details from the earlier account in his *Ecclesiastical History* (9.9.2–11), dated 325—when he first met Constantine—in which there is no mention of a vision or a cross or the appearing of Christ. Certainly there is no record of any of Constantine’s 98,000 men having reported a single word about such an event in 312. The puzzle is compounded by another early account by Lactantius, a Christian scholar and teacher of Constantine’s son Crispus. In *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 44.5–6 (ca. 313–315), Lactantius says that Constantine was told in a *dream* (not through a vision) to inscribe his soldiers’ *shields* (not their standards) *with the superimposed Greek letters chi and rho* (not a cross). *Chi* and *rho* are the first two letters of the Greek word *Christos*.

A more imaginative explanation of Constantine’s experience may be found in the journal *Byzantion*, in an article titled “*Ambiguitas Constantiniana: The Caeleste Signum Dei* of Constantine the Great.” The writers contend that the emperor looked up at the night sky (not during the day) and saw a conjunction of Mars, Saturn, Jupiter and Venus in the constellations Capricorn and Sagittarius (Michael DiMaio, Jörn Zeuge and Natalia Zotov, 1988). This would have been viewed as a bad omen by his mostly pagan soldiers, but

Constantine was able to manufacture a positive meaning by explaining that the conjunction was in the form of the Chi-Rho and was therefore a favorable sign.

But there is another account of a vision that may indicate a conflation of stories and claims and at the same time resolve the contradictions between accounts. An anonymous pagan orator, eulogizing the emperor in 310, speaks of a religious experience at a pagan temple in Gaul that year, when Constantine claimed to have seen a vision of the sun god Apollo. Though not all scholars agree, it seems likely that this was the origin of the well-known Christian account of the vision. According to some of them, including A.H.M. Jones, Peter Weiss and Timothy Barnes, what Constantine and his army actually saw in 310 was a solar halo phenomenon—the result of the sun shining through ice crystals in the atmosphere. Later, the emperor, preferring to ascribe victory to his Christian Savior’s intervention, reinterpreted the experience.

That the emperor should at the same time be linked to Apollo comes as no surprise, however, since so many Roman emperors before him worshiped the sun. And there are many indications that Constantine continued to honor the gods of his fathers throughout his life. The emperor’s view of religion in general was typical of his time. As James Carroll writes, it was a “fluid religious self-understanding” (*Constantine’s Sword*, 2001). Divine favor meant success, so it was incumbent on any ruler to seek the favor of any or all of the gods. Accordingly, when the Senate dedicated Rome’s still-famous victory arch to Constantine in 315, the inscription read that he and his army had conquered Maxentius “by the inspiration of divinity and by the greatness of [his] mind.” The words were deliberately ambiguous so as not to offend anyone—man or god.

As noted, Roman Christianity had achieved the status of an approved religion in the empire almost 50 years before Constantine came to power in 306, though the emperor Diocletian (284–305) indulged once more in persecuting Christians. Constantine believed at the time that this would lead to bad fortune for the empire.

In the wake of Diocletian’s rule, the politically astute Constantine recognized the advantage of bringing together the factious empire. And the form of Christianity in which he became increasingly interested allowed him the opportunity to promote unity. Traditional pagan religions were varied in belief, and while they continued to be tolerated, they could not deliver unity in the same way that Christianity might—though on this point Constantine was to be tested as he found the new religion itself rent by division over doctrine. Accordingly, the man whose coins were inscribed *rector totius orbis* (“ruler over the whole world”) set limits on his tolerance. In his desire for religious unity, Constantine opposed any version of Christianity that was not orthodox by Roman Catholic standards.

## **WORSHIPING OTHER GODS**

Soon after he captured Rome, “the Christian emperor” approved a new priesthood in Egypt, dedicated to the worship of his imperial family, the Flavians. This action was to be expected, since the imperial cult was still in vogue. And if there was not a compelling reason to change a popular custom that kept him elevated in people’s esteem, why do so? What Constantine succeeded in doing was to adapt previous traditions for new purposes. According to Jones, “the institutions devoted to the imperial cult were without difficulty secularized and continued to flourish under the Christian empire” (*Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 1978).

In a related example, the emperor retained the pagan religious title *Pontifex Maximus* (supreme pontiff; literally “great builder of the bridge” [between the gods and men]) throughout his life. Its practical aspect was that he continued to hold supreme authority over all religions, including, of course, his preferred version of Christianity.

This is not to say that he did not move away from pagan practice at times. For example, in 315, as the celebration of his 10th anniversary as Augustus got under way, he refused to allow sacrifices to the traditional Roman gods.

The sun nevertheless provided the emperor, like so many others before him, with a symbol of life-sustaining power, strength and heavenly light, which he could manipulate to his advantage. In 274 the emperor Aurelian had declared *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun) the one supreme God. It is not surprising that soon after succession to emperor in 306, Constantine, filled with overweening ambition, had coins struck with the words “To the Unconquered Sun my companion”—a practice he continued into the 320s.

In the East, meanwhile, he reestablished the ancient Greek city of Byzantium as Constantinople, or “Constantine’s City”—his new capital. The revitalized city was styled on Rome and completed in 330.

### **RELICS OLD AND NEW**

The fusion of pagan and Christian elements continued to be a mark of the emperor’s approach to religion. Syncretism was apparent in many of his activities from architecture to “Christian” practice. In his new hippodrome, he installed a serpentine column from the Greek cult center of Delphi, where it had stood in the Temple of Apollo since 479 B.C.E. Nearby was the First Milestone, from which all distances were measured, making the city the new center of the world. Above the milestone was positioned a relic from the Holy Land, “discovered” by Constantine’s pilgrim mother, Helena. It was believed to be nothing less than the “True Cross” of Jesus’ crucifixion.

The emperor also erected another structure, the remnants of which are still located in Istanbul (the modern name for Constantinople) and known as the Burnt Column or the Column of Constantine. One hundred feet high and made of porphyry, it stood on a 20-foot plinth containing the Palladium—a pagan trophy—and supposed relics with biblical origins: Noah’s hatchet, Mary Magdalene’s ointment jar, and what remained of the baskets and bread from Christ’s miraculous feeding of the people, were all said to be kept there beside a statue of the goddess Athena, brought from Troy by the Greek hero Aeneas. The column itself came from the ancient Egyptian sun-cult center, Heliopolis (City of the Sun).

Atop the column was a statue whose body was taken from Phidias’s statue of Helios, the young Greek god of the sun. The head was crowned by a typical radiate diadem, with features fashioned to resemble Constantine’s own. Historian John Julius Norwich writes that in the Column of Constantine, “Apollo, *Sol Invictus* and Jesus Christ all seem subordinated to a new supreme being—the Emperor Constantine.”

When the emperor established a permanent day of rest empirewide in 321, he was no doubt happy to choose a day that had significance for Roman Christianity and that happened to coincide with his devotion to Apollo. Accordingly he wrote, “All magistrates, city dwellers and artisans are to rest on the venerable day of the Sun.” Nowhere did he mention Christ or “the Lord’s day.” He only mentions veneration of the sun. Jones notes that it seems the emperor “imagined that Christian observance of the first day . . . was a tribute to the unconquered sun.”

When Constantine established the date for the celebration of Easter, he formalized the method still used today: Easter Sunday is the first Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox, when the sun’s position marks the beginning of spring. This was the practice of the churches at Alexandria in Egypt and in the West when Constantine came on the scene, whereas the churches in the East established the date based on the Jewish

Passover. While the sun's position was part of the new method of calculation, it was probably Constantine's hatred of the Jews rather than his devotion to Apollo that caused him to insist on the change. As he wrote in a summary letter, "Let there be nothing in common between you and the detestable mob of Jews! . . . with that nation of parricides and Lord-killers" (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.18.2; 3.19.1).

No doubt, in the case of the other main celebration in Christianity—the date of Christ's birth, which had been earlier made to coincide with the pagan observance of the winter solstice and the birth of the sun god in late December—Constantine was more than pleased.

## CONSTANTINE THE CONVERT

Constantine's actual *conversion* to Christianity did not occur until he was dying, for only then did he receive a rite of baptism. Though it is often claimed that it was usual for people of the time to put off such commitment until their later years, Constantine's everyday way of life never corresponded to that of Jesus, Paul and the early apostles, whom he claimed to follow. His involvement in the executions of his wife, Fausta; his son, Crispus; and his sister's stepson, Licinianus, a year after the ecclesiastical conference of Nicea leave little doubt that his value system was anything but that of a follower of Christ. Certainly, aspects of Christian belief influenced his rule, but his career demonstrates more evidence of continued pagan adherence than *personal* Christian commitment.

Norwich notes that by the end of his life the emperor was probably succumbing to religious megalomania: "From being God's chosen instrument it was but a short step to being God himself, that *summus deus* in whom all other Gods and other religions were subsumed."

Perhaps that is why Constantine's lifelong balancing act between paganism and Roman Christianity continued in the recognition others afforded him posthumously. The Roman Senate deified him, naming him *divus* like so many preceding emperors and issuing coins with his deified image. According to historian Michael Grant, it was "a curious indication that his adoption of the Christian faith did not prevent this pagan custom from being retained" (*The Emperor Constantine*, 1993). Nevertheless, his service to his preferred version of Christianity caused the Orthodox Church to name him a saint.

As for Constantine himself, he made sure that he would be remembered in a very specific way. For several years he had taken to referring to himself as "Equal of the Apostles." Thus he planned to be buried in a church erected in Constantinople during his reign: the Church of the Holy Apostles. There, upon his death in the summer of 337, the emperor was placed in a sarcophagus and flanked on either side by six standing sarcophagi said to contain relics of the 12 apostles. He was the 13th apostle, or better yet, cast in the role of Christ Himself in the center of his original disciples. He was Constantine the Great, an emperor whose pretensions at godhead suppressed his Master's commanded humility, even in death.

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## PART 3

### The Fall and Rise of the Roman Empire

*The once invincible Roman Empire is teetering on the edge of collapse. Will the idea of humans turned savior-gods survive the end of empire? Will their claims of God's approval echo in other realms and times?*



For the fourth-century inhabitants of Rome, the thought that their civilization would shortly collapse was remote—about as remote as the British would have thought the chances of their 19th-century empire dissolving within a few decades, following not one but two unprecedented world wars. Equally today, it seems almost unthinkable that the United States could no longer be the dominant power sometime in the near future. Yet the fact is that no empire or superpower in history has been able to resist its own demise.

To the Romans, the end of empire seemed utterly impossible. As with each preceding imperial power, their dominant influence had spread like a stain over vast areas of the known world. Their architecture, their dress, their language, their currency, their military prowess, their adopted form of Christianity—and above all, their government—was everywhere. They had become civilization. But for the few with eyes to see, the signs of internal decay were already present decades earlier.

#### **THEODOSIUS THE CHRISTIAN**

The fall of the Western Roman Empire is traditionally dated at 476 C.E., when the so-called barbarians sacked Rome. But it was really with the death of the Christian emperor Theodosius the Great in 395 that the collapse slowly began. He was in fact the last emperor to rule over a united Roman Empire before the West's demise. As John Julius Norwich

notes, “from the moment of his death the Western Empire embarks on its inexorable eighty-year decline, the prey of the Germanic and other tribes that progressively tighten their grip” (*Byzantium: The Early Centuries*, 1988).

During his rule, Theodosius had set in motion certain religious practices that would play out in the coming centuries. It was he, for example, who introduced the term *CatholicChristian* into Roman Christian religious life. Although Ignatius had first used the word *catholic* in 110 to describe Christendom as a whole, Theodosius now made a significant distinction: in 380, he issued an edict defining a Catholic Christian as one who believed in the consubstantiality of the Trinity according to the Nicene Creed (see *“Paul and Paula”*). He further anathematized any who did not, referring to them as “mad and foolish” and ordering that they “bear the ignominious name of heretics . . . to be visited first by the divine vengeance, and secondly by the stroke of our own authority, which we have received in accordance with the will of heaven.” Here, as in Parts 1 and 2 of this series, we witness a ruler who uses conformity to humanly devised religious codes to subjugate some and to manipulate others in the name of God.

But even the emperor’s authority had limits. In an event that proved to be a hinge of history, this Christian ruler was deemed to have gone too far. It came about in 390 when the people of Thessalonica, objecting to the billeting of Rome’s barbarian troops there, murdered a Gothic captain. An outraged Theodosius ordered the punishment of the city. Though he soon countermanded the order, his reversal came too late to prevent the death of seven thousand citizens in a bloodbath in the local hippodrome. The bishop of Milan, Ambrose—more powerful at this point than the bishop of Rome—refused the emperor communion until he publicly repented. In the first confrontation of its kind in the Christianized empire, a spiritual leader opposed a temporal one and won. Theodosius donned sackcloth and came to Ambrose for forgiveness. Norwich notes, “It was a turning-point in the history of Christendom . . . , the first time that a Christian prince had publicly submitted to judgement, condemnation and punishment by an authority which he recognized as higher than his own.” But it was not to be the last time as the temporal power of the religious hierarchy grew within the borders of the empire.

## **ASSAULTING THE EMPIRE**

The first of the barbarian tribes living within the empire to rise against Rome following Theodosius’s death were the Visigoths. They invaded Italy in 401 under their leader, Alaric—a man who had fought both for and against Rome in recent years. Though Alaric was not interested in overturning Roman society (his goal was to find a secure yet autonomous home within it for his people), he besieged the capital three times. When his patience with Rome’s refusal to agree to any terms ran out, the third siege ended with the sacking of the city in 410. But Alaric’s progress and that of his people soon ended with his death following a raging fever.

Next came the Huns under their leader, Attila, “the Scourge of God.” In 452 he and his hordes swarmed over Italy, capturing many cities. During his advance toward Rome he suddenly stopped, saving the city from collapse, at least for a while. A year later Attila was dead from a hemorrhage and the Hunnish people were denied victory under their greatest leader.

The Vandals were the third of the barbarian peoples to come against Rome. Settled in Spain in the early fifth century, in 429 they captured Rome’s North African possessions and cut a deal whereby they gained Senate recognition as legitimate members of the empire. Their king, Gaiseric, soon reneged on the agreement and declared an independent kingdom centered on Carthage. The Vandals’ moment came in 455 when the emperor Valentinian III

died, and they set sail to attack Rome itself. Over a two-week period they plundered the city, removing its wealth to their North African capital, including vessels that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem after its destruction in 70 C.E.

Rome limped on for another 20 years until Orestes, commander of the army in the West, rose in opposition against the new emperor, Julius Nepos. Establishing himself as kingmaker, Orestes promoted his own son as emperor. The barbarian mercenaries, on whom the army had depended for many years, now pressed Orestes for more land of their own. When he refused, they put forward a member of a Germanic tribe, the Scyrian Odoacer, as the new Augustus. In the ensuing struggle, Orestes was put to flight and killed. In turn his son, Romulus Augustulus, was forced to abdicate. Thus it was that Odoacer and his men participated in the end of the empire in the West in September 476.

## **POWER, THE PAPACY AND RECONCILIATION**

Though Odoacer himself refused to name an emperor in the West (he saw himself as restoring the empire to one ruler, now resident in the East), his action meant that the Roman people soon became accustomed to having no local imperial authority. It was to be 60 years before a new leader, Justinian, would arise to conquer Italy once more in the name of Rome.

In the meantime, the resulting power vacuum led to the rise of the important and long-lasting political power of the papacy. According to Norwich, "men looked for another father figure. . . . And so they raised up the Bishop of Rome, already the Primate of Christendom, investing him with temporal authority as well as spiritual and surrounding him with much of the pomp and semi-mystical ceremonial formerly reserved for the Emperors. The age of the medieval Papacy had begun." Gradually the papacy took on the imperial Roman model as its form of government, adopting ancient Roman titles such as *Pontifex Maximus*, and new ones such as "Holy Father" and "Vicar of God and Vicar of Christ" (standing in place of God and Christ on earth). Not surprisingly, with the passage of time, the church's leaders became influential players in world politics.

Meanwhile, in the years following Odoacer's removal of the emperor in the West, a ruler arose in the East whose peasant origins in Thrace seem to contradict the achievements of his reign: Justin was a military hero but also uneducated and illiterate. The reason for his success lies with his nephew and adopted son, Justinian, whom he allowed to guide the creation and execution of policy. Indeed, according to some accounts, Justinian may well have engineered his uncle's rise to power.

One of the great achievements of Justin's rule was reconciliation with the papacy after 35 years of schism caused by theological debate over the nature of Christ. But it was at Justinian's urging that the breach was healed, an outcome that would later mesh with his own quest for a reunited and revived Roman Empire. Justinian's political philosophy can be summed up in the phrase "one God, one Empire, one Church."

By the end of Justin's reign, the pieces were in place for a return to the golden days of empire. His subjects were on the verge, in Norwich's words, of "an age in which, under a once-more benevolent God represented by a noble and dazzling Emperor, it would regain its lost territories and recapture its past greatness." In April 527, Justinian and his wife, Theodora, were named coemperor and empress. In August Justin died, leaving the couple to govern together for 21 years and Justinian alone for a further 17.

## **REVIVING RELIGION AND LAW**



During his rule, Justinian pursued the recodification of all Roman law, attempting to remove all contradictions and to bring it into harmony with Roman Christian teaching. In 529, after only 14 months, the new code was ready and became the final authority throughout the empire.

Justinian also expanded the building program he had begun under his uncle. His devotion to Christ's mother Mary, whom a church council had declared to be the Mother of God a century earlier, was evident from his construction of a great church in her name in Jerusalem. Justinian was responsible for several other religious buildings, including monasteries and churches dedicated to martyrs, and he rebuilt the famous Hagia Sophia church following a disastrous fire. Still standing today, it was for seven centuries the largest church building in all Christendom. When Justinian entered the new building for its inauguration, he stood silently for a time before making a grandiose claim in reference to the builder of the first Jerusalem temple: "Solomon, I have surpassed thee."

The emperor's religious policy was based on the unity of church and state and the belief that the empire was the physical equivalent of its heavenly counterpart. Justinian understood himself to be Christ's vice-regent on earth and the defender of the orthodox faith. In this regard, he ran true to the self-image of previous emperors: he saw himself as a kind of religious savior. For this reason he moved to protect his Catholic subjects against their Arian Christian counterparts throughout the empire. Arians claimed that Christ was merely the highest of created beings and not of the same substance as God.

As Justinian grew older, theological concerns increasingly dominated his attention. Among his legislative acts was the establishment of the nonbiblical festival of Christmas as a civic holiday, and fixing January 6 as the date of the Epiphany (celebrated by some as a commemoration of the Magi's visit to Jesus, and by others as the anniversary of His baptism).

## **RECOVERING CHRISTIAN TERRITORY**

Whatever his other interests, Justinian devoted himself more to the lost lands of the empire in the West than to any other cause. He believed that it was his responsibility to regain Christendom's domain.

First came the recapture of Carthage from the Vandals. When Justinian's victorious general, Belisarius, returned to Constantinople, he did so to a hero's welcome, bringing with him the spoils of war, ranging from Vandal chiefs to the menorah, the seven-branched candlestick from the Jerusalem temple. Justinian, whose superstitious nature was aroused by warnings from the Jewish community, returned the candlestick and other temple vessels to Jerusalem lest bad fortune befall him.

The recapture of Italy from the Ostrogoths proved a more difficult task, consuming most of the remainder of Justinian's reign. Unlike North Africa, where Gaiseric had ruled independently, Italy was governed as an imperial territory under a viceroy. Eventually, after seemingly endless battles, sieges and counterattacks, Italy was united with Byzantium. On the other side of the Mediterranean, however, Justinian was less successful. Nonetheless, though he failed to conquer all of Spain, the emperor could say by the end of his rule that he had restored the empire from the Black Sea to the Atlantic.

Does this qualify Justinian as a great emperor? Norwich describes him as vain, jealous, weak-willed, vacillating, dominated by his wife, paranoid and easily angered, but also as hardworking and devoted to his church and its theology. Still, although he professed Christian values, he had no compunction about exterminating one of his uncle's perceived

competitors nor allowing the slaughter of 30,000 of his own subjects as punishment for insurrection. Justinian was a man who ruled autocratically with all the trappings of power, surrounding himself with “high ceremonial pomp” and engaging in “sumptuous processions.”

For all of his failings and failures, however, Justinian’s imperial like was seen neither in Byzantium nor elsewhere until more than 200 years later when another king arose, whose conquered territories would approximate the outlines of the old Western Empire.

## **ENTER THE FRANKS**

In the eighth century, the pope and his territories came under pressure from the Lombards. They had migrated into Italy from the north in the area of Noricum and Pannonia (roughly today’s Austria and part of Hungary) following the death of Justinian, putting an end to his revived Roman Empire.

Trapped between Lombards on both sides and differing with them over doctrinal matters, Pope Stephen II sought security elsewhere. He turned to the Roman Christian Franks, who had become the most successful of the barbarian peoples as the empire failed in the West. Their territory under the Carolingian dynasty comprised much of modern France, Switzerland and western Germany when the pope crossed the Alps in 754 to seek help from Pippin III. The king agreed to protect the leader of Western Christendom, and in return the pope anointed Pippin, his wife and his sons to be the new royal family of Francia, and appointed Pippin patrician of the Romans. This gave the Carolingians enormous religious legitimacy and opened the door for them to establish themselves *within* Italy as the defenders of Roman Christianity.

## **THE GREAT CHARLES**

Following Pippin’s death in 768, his son Charlemagne greatly expanded Frankish territory. Believing in the power of the sword to extend and defend Christianity, he quickly concluded the war in Aquitaine, defeated the Lombards (774) and seized their crown, and made his son sub-king of Italy (781). There followed successful campaigns against the Saxons (concluded 797), whom he converted to Christianity; the annexation of already Christian Bavaria (788); and the subjection of the Avars (796) in the area east of Bavaria and today’s Austria. Soon the territory of the only Christian king in the West stretched from the North Sea to the Adriatic. This gave the papacy the opportunity to proselytize new lands in northern and central Europe. Charlemagne’s reputation was such that the patriarch of Jerusalem named him protector of the holy places and gave him the keys to the Holy Sepulcher.

Charlemagne visited Rome for the first time at Easter in 774. Signaling his loyalty to Roman Christianity, the king climbed on his knees to meet the pope, kissing each step of the great staircase of the Basilica of St. Peter as he went. That same year, the Frankish king confirmed to Pope Adrian I Pippin’s gift of territories in central Italy, creating the Papal States. Charlemagne’s defeat of the Lombards at around the same time caused the pope to name him the new Constantine.

On Christmas day, 800, Charlemagne returned to the city. As he rose from celebrating mass in St. Peter’s, Pope Leo III placed the imperial crown on his head and consecrated him as emperor of the Romans. It seems that the moment may have been prearranged in the summer of 799 in Paderborn, Saxony. An insurrection in Rome, directed against the pope, had brought him to Charlemagne’s court to request help. As protector of Western Christendom, the king could not refuse.

But the quid pro quo for the emperor's willingness to help was of much greater significance than the defeat of the Roman rebels. Italian historian Alessandro Barbero notes that the people of Rome were to acclaim Charlemagne emperor, "just as in previous times they had acclaimed Augustus and Constantine. Thus the Frankish king would become the successor to the Roman emperors. . . ." In 800, the Western Roman Empire was thus reborn. According to professor of early medieval history Rosamond McKitterick, Charlemagne's coronation was "an act that was to have far-reaching ideological repercussions in the succeeding centuries" (*Atlas of the Medieval World*, 2003). At least until the fall of the Papal States in 1870, if not beyond, "the Carolingian imperial ideal, with its connotations of Roman and Christian imperial rule in emulation of Constantine and Theodosius, played a powerful role in European political ideology," writes McKitterick. Leo's act was certainly something out of the ordinary. No pope had ever taken such power upon himself. He assumed the right to appoint the emperor of the Romans. The pope had risen above his protector.

Aside from Leo's role in his elevation, Charlemagne understood himself to be divinely appointed and responsible for the spread and support of the Roman Christian religion across the entirety of his empire. In monasteries, abbeys, churches and religious schools, the use of the Latin language was one of the evidences of continuity with the Roman past. Charlemagne's efforts to organize ecclesiastical affairs, according to McKitterick, "proved an effective long-term means for cultural imperialism and the spread of Frankish influence and Latin Christianity." In 794, the king even achieved a single European currency by reform of coinage—something modern Europeans have only recently begun to reinstitute.

That Charlemagne saw himself in imperial terms even before his coronation in Rome is demonstrated by his palace at Aachen, mostly complete by 798 and designed to compete with Rome, Constantinople and Ravenna (the "second Rome" in the West).

However he viewed his role, the emperor's massacre of 4,500 unarmed, surrendered Saxons resulted in a black mark on his reputation. According to Barbero, Charlemagne saw himself as a biblical David fighting pagan enemies, so it is not difficult to imagine that he justified himself vis-à-vis the Old Testament, "from which the king drew constant inspiration." But as with other rulers who cruelly enforced the prevailing nonbiblical orthodoxy, Charlemagne's fierce reactions to Saxon noncompliance went beyond the spirit and teaching of the New Testament. Barbero notes that "the most ferocious of all the laws enacted during his life, the *Capitulare de partibus Saxonie*, . . . imposed the death penalty on anyone who offended the Christian religion and its clergy." In one specific example, those who did not fast on Friday were to be put to death. He was, as his spiritual advisor Alcuin put it, "a chief whose devotion never ceases to fortify the Catholic faith with evangelical firmness against the followers of heresy." (See "*Orthodoxy: Just Another Heresy?*").

So far in this series, we have seen that association with religious belief and or practice on the part of rulers may reveal little more than expedience. Men in supreme power have exploited all religions and their adherents, from Roman paganism to Roman Christianity. Moreover, they have imagined that the mantle of savior-god has fallen on their shoulders, much to the detriment of those who did not accept their self-appointed divine status as arbiters of orthodoxy.

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## PART 4

### Aspects of Empire: Roman, Holy and German

*Symbols, parallels and patterns of the past assist the consolidation of power, and if religion can be harnessed in the pursuit of empire, so much the better. When a man can present himself as a god, or at least as divinity's chosen servant, and his supporters promote his fantasy, he can wield authority like no other.*



**“Behold, I bring you here King Otto, chosen by God, designated by the mighty lord Henry, and elevated to the throne by all the princes. If you are satisfied with this choice show it by raising your right hands to heaven!”**

**–From Widukind of Corvey's account of the Coronation, cited by Martin Kitchen, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Germany***

When Otto I was crowned king of the Saxons and the Franks in 936, the stage was set for another attempt to revive aspects of the Roman Empire in the West. As we might expect from other examples in this series on would-be messiahs, the trappings of earlier times are soon called into service to bolster the reconstruction effort. Otto's revival was no different: it relied heavily on imperial precedent.

Within a generation of the death of the Frankish king and “august emperor” Charlemagne in 814, his Roman revival fell prey to his squabbling heirs. The Franks divided into two independent peoples. The eastern branch inhabited what is now central Germany, and their western brothers the northern half of modern-day France. At the heart of Charlemagne's vast empire, stretching from the North Sea to the Adriatic, a third, disputed “Middle Kingdom” emerged. It comprised Italy, Provence, Burgundy, Lorraine and Frisia (which roughly corresponds to the Netherlands today). The power politics of the region made it a battleground for decades, dictating key aspects of Otto's foreign policy agenda.

The region we know today as Germany was home to five main tribes: the Franks, the Saxons, the Swabians, the Bavarians and the Thuringians. The tribes looked to dukes to defend them in military emergencies. In 911, when the ruling east Frankish Carolingian line became extinct, the dukes bound themselves together in a confederation of sorts and elected one from among them to be supreme leader, or king. Subservient in war, the dukes maintained a high level of independence in times of peace. This pattern of government has

persisted in the region and finds parallels in contemporary federal Germany and the European Union.

### **THE KING WHO WOULD BE EMPEROR**

Though Otto had been named by his father, King Henry I, to succeed him when he died, it was nevertheless up to the powerful representatives of the Germanic tribes to sanction the designated successor.

The new king was confirmed in two separate ceremonies, lay and ecclesiastical. Seated on a throne in the cathedral courtyard in Charlemagne's capital of Aachen, Otto first received the loyalty oaths of the lay princes. The ecclesiastical portion of his election came inside the cathedral. There, in response to the archbishop of Mainz's request, Otto was acclaimed in Roman style by the raised right hands of the common people, confirming their submission with the traditional shout of "*Sieg und Heil*" ("victory and salvation"). Standing behind the altar, he received the royal insignia: the sword to keep at bay the enemies of Christ and maintain peace among the Franks; the cloak and bracelets, signaling the need for zealous faith and endurance in preserving peace; and the staff and scepter of monarchical might and authority. The archbishops of Mainz and Cologne then anointed and crowned the new leader. According to historian Martin Kitchen, the ceremony "implied that Otto would follow in Charles the Great's footsteps and be crowned emperor in Rome" (*The Cambridge Illustrated History of Germany*, 1996).

From the start, Otto relied on the historical pull of Charlemagne's reputation and success to strengthen his rule, reaching back to Roman roots for additional legitimacy. One of his biographers, the monk Widukind of Corvey, describes his view of Otto's unique attributes in language drawn from Roman pagan antiquity: *divinus animus, caelestis virtus, fortuna, constantia* and *virtus*. The continuing thread of the Roman ruler-cult is one of the themes in this series about men who would be god. Not surprisingly, Otto's coronation was accompanied by reminders of that ancient cult. Austrian historian Friedrich Heer notes the conclusion of Otto's crowning, with its "two deeply archaic ruler-cult rituals" (*The Holy Roman Empire*, 1968). One was his enthronement on the previous august emperor Charlemagne's seat in the cathedral, from which he heard mass, seen by all and seeing all. The other ancient ritual was a banquet at which Otto was attended personally by four tribal dukes—the powerful peers who had raised him high above themselves.

### **POWER FROM ON HIGH?**

Symbols of political and religious power become very significant in such circumstances. Otto inherited another such emblem of authority from his father. It was a celebrated lance, known variously today as the Lance of Longinus, the Lance of St. Maurice, the Holy Lance or the Spear of Destiny, and it seems to have embodied both political and religious authority of extraordinary significance. Its tip, embellished by small brass crosses, was said to contain a nail or nails from the crucified Christ's hands and feet. In 926, Rudolf II of Burgundy had relinquished the spear to Henry in exchange for the city of Basel—the seemingly uneven exchange an indication of the extraordinary value Henry put on the iron relic. Though recent scientific analysis has dated the spear to the 7th century, at the time of Otto it was said to have belonged to fourth-century emperor Constantine the Great. The legend had grown over time, as some began to suggest that it had actually been brought from the Holy Land by that consummate collector of holy relics, Constantine's mother Helena.

Less important than the actual age or history of the lance, however, is the significance attached to it by those who owned it and its resulting effect on the events of history. According to the late historian Geoffrey Barraclough, for example, by parting with this symbol

of Constantine's inheritance, Rudolf surrendered Burgundian rights to Italy (*The Origins of Modern Germany*, 1984). Though Henry was unable to undertake his planned march into Italy to stake his claim—he died from a stroke in 936—his son would inherit his rights to empire.

Heer writes that for Otto the Holy Lance was “symbol and proof of his claim to Italy and to the imperial office.” It was to become revered as one of the holiest of all imperial insignia for a thousand years. What better sign of the transfer of both Roman authority and Roman devotion to Christianity could Otto possess than an imperial instrument that, according to legend, incorporated the Messiah's crucifixion nails?

As for the newly fashioned Ottonian crown, what better symbol of the continuing lineage of the priests, kings and apostles of biblical times than the coronation diadem, with its portraits of four powerful biblical savior figures—David, Solomon, Isaiah and the pre-existent Christ—and its two 12-stoned panels, one imitative of the breastplate of the Hebrew high priest and the other reflecting the 12 apostles? Surely the new king was destined for greatness.

Still, the burden of ruling over and protecting Christendom that had been Constantine's, Justinian's and Charlemagne's was not to descend fully on Otto's shoulders for most of his reign. He faced internal struggles with family and other tribal dukes from 936 to 955. Though he overcame his domestic adversaries and succeeded in military campaigns in Burgundy, against the Slavs, in Denmark, in Bohemia, and in Italy, where he became king of the Lombards in 951, it was not until two decades after his accession that the defining moment for Otto (and German history) presented itself.

## REACHING TOWARD THE EAST

The Magyars had long troubled eastern Europe. Otto's father had negotiated a nine-year truce with them, buying precious time to rebuild his army. But Magyar incursions into German territory resumed during Otto's reign, coming to a head in the 950s. According to Heer, in the final and decisive battle with the Magyars at Lechfeld near Augsburg in 955—said by some to be the greatest battle of medieval times—Otto carried the Holy Lance. Tenth-century historian Liudprand of Cremona, a bishop given to colorful storytelling and the first writer known to mention the lance, wrote that it was regarded as a miracle-working spear because of the sacred relic it was reputed to contain. Heer writes that by carrying the spear, Otto was “linking himself directly with the saving energy which flowed from Christ the conqueror.”

Despite these overtones of Christian inspiration, Widukind remarks that Otto's postbattle victory celebration followed the error-laden practices of his pagan forefathers. It seems that neither the king nor the clergy was averse to combining Christian and pagan elements whenever it made sense. In fact, Heer notes that the popularity of the king and his loyal supporter and bishop, Udalrich of Augsburg, arose from “the fusion in their own persons of the archaic with the new, the pre-Christian with the Christian.” Avoiding the inclination to present the king as a religious purist, Heer adds that Otto's pagan-Christian syncretism explains “the true magic, the compelling power, the monumental appeal of Ottonian culture.”

Otto's resounding victory at Lechfeld had several consequences. He was now recognized as the champion of Christendom and according to Widukind was declared emperor by his men at the battle's conclusion. His imperial role was assured, as was the establishing of the German imperial church as a political force. The Hungarian kingdom came into being and the Bavarian kingdom of Austria was refounded and Germanized.

The battle at the River Lech also opened up the eastern borderlands of Germany to zealous missionary activity from the Baltic to the Adriatic, initiating the German inclination for

*Ostpolitik* or *Drang nach Osten* (looking eastward for influence and expansion) that lasted well into the 20th century. Together with his imperial bishops, the king could now embark on an enlarged pursuit of Germany's Christian destiny. Fortuitously for Otto, in 961 the pope called on him to defend Rome against Berengar of Ivrea (40 kilometers north of Turin), whom Otto had left to govern Italy. The king's success was such that the pope helped Otto achieve his father's dream. Though Otto had failed to gain the imperial title following his earlier Italian campaign, in February 962 in time-honored tradition, he received the acclamations of the clergy and people of Rome, and Pope John XII crowned him emperor.

Within 10 days of the coronation, Otto secured the pope's agreement to make Magdeburg a new archbishopric. His first wife, Edgitha (sister of England's West Saxon king Athelstan and granddaughter of Alfred the Great), had been given the city as a wedding gift in 929. Now it was to become the center of missionary efforts in the east, in particular in Hungary and Poland. Fashioned by the emperor as a German Rome, Magdeburg's only rival was Byzantine Constantinople, center of the Orthodox faith. One result of Otto's actions, apparent still today, was that culturally and religiously Hungary and Poland became part of western Europe, while Russia took on Orthodox belief.

### **A NUANCED LEGACY**

Otto died in 973 and was buried in the newly built cathedral at Magdeburg, next to Edgitha. His 37-year rule had mobilized the church-state alliance that was to characterize the Holy Roman Empire for centuries to come. Though emperors and popes would contend over the limits of each others' powers, the alliance of Roman Catholic Church and Holy Roman Empire would endure for centuries.

Otto centered his relations with the papacy on his belief that, as sovereign, he superseded the church in authority. At times, even his archbishops in Cologne and Mainz were reckoned superior to the pontiff in Rome. Together, the emperor-king and his imperial bishops would rule the church. Otto would decide the Christian boundaries of his empire in the east. Signaling his supreme authority over the papacy, within two years of his imperial coronation he ejected Pope John XII for conspiring with the Hungarians to overthrow him.

Assessing Otto's reign and its significance for almost 900 years of German history, it is important to acknowledge that while he styled himself on Charlemagne, he did not attempt to fully replicate his empire. Many historians have supposed that Otto's design was to fully revive the ancient empire in the West. But history reveals a more nuanced picture. For example, Otto did not unite the Italian peninsula by driving out the Byzantines. In fact, at the end of a campaign that began there in 966, he concluded peace with them and negotiated his son's marriage in St. Peter's Basilica to the Byzantine princess Theophano. As a result, the German empire was recognized at last by the Byzantine emperor in 972.

Another example of why a more nuanced view of Otto's achievements is necessary revolves around the fact that his territory never approximated that of Charlemagne. The Middle Kingdom was his focus. Indeed, exact replications of the Western Roman Empire cannot be found. With respect to Germany, subsequent emperors responded in different ways to the challenges of their own times. As Barraclough sensibly observed, "the significance of the empire and the imperial title changed from generation to generation and from emperor to emperor, reflecting the varying characters of the different rulers and the different *Zeitgeist* of succeeding ages. It was not an unvarying conception, a constant factor, meaning the same thing to all men at all times or even to all men at one time" (*Origins of Modern Germany*).

What, then, was Otto's achievement? In what sense was he "the Great"? The answer must lie in what he set in motion. During his reign, as Charlemagne had done, he used only the



title “august emperor” without any reference to territory. Conrad II (1027–39), introduced the word “Roman” into the name of his empire. The term “Holy Empire” was employed in 1157 under Frederick I, whereas “Holy Roman Empire” (*sacrum Romanum imperium*) dates from 1254. Finally, “of the German Nation” was added in the 16th century. Ruled by several dynasties in succession (Ottonian, Salian, Hohenstaufen and Habsburg), the German empire endured until 1806, when Francis II of Austria resigned his imperial title. Otto’s achievement was that he set the course of the German monarchy for almost nine centuries, during which western Europe’s relationship to the ancient Roman Empire was represented by papal approval of German emperors, while the papacy relied on German emperors for the defense of the Roman Church.

One such defender was the last holy Roman emperor to be crowned by a pope, Charles V (1519–56). It is with his story that we begin next time in Part 5 of *Messiahs!*

DAVID HULME

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## PART 5

# Where the Sun Never Set: Charles V and the Defense of Christendom

*So far in this series we have examined the lives of several historical figures who have attempted either to maintain the Roman Empire or to recover elements of the fallen empire in the West. Of the latter, some have succeeded more than others in emulating aspects of the empire territorially and/or in seeking to defend and extend Constantine's Christian heritage. But to whatever degree they have succeeded, all have failed in reestablishing the "glories of ancient Rome" for long. And despite the apparent attachment of some to Christianity, they have all usurped the role of messiah and identified with the pagan divinity cults of ancient Roman times.*



“Caesar is not a doctor of the gospels but their champion.”

—Erasmus on Charles V, in the Dedication of his Paraphrase of Matthew's Gospel

No one could lay claim to being more thoroughly European than the holy Roman emperor Charles V (1519–56). He was Spanish, Portuguese, French-Burgundian, Austrian and Netherlander, and he also had Bourbon and Plantagenet blood in him. He is said to have had ancestors who were German, Greek, Italian, Slav, Lithuanian, Bohemian, Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, Spanish Muslim and Jew. He spoke Spanish, French, Dutch, Italian and German fluently and acquired more than 70 royal, princely and other official titles, among them elected king of Germany, archduke of Austria, duke of Burgundy, and king of Castile and Aragon. By extension he had ruling rights in Bohemia, Hungary, Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, the Netherlands and the New World of the Americas, as well as claims to territories in Croatia and elsewhere. And Charles's royal ties were even more impressive when extended family relationships are considered. Historian H.G. Koenigsberger notes that “at one time or another during his reign, Charles himself or a member of his family sat as ruler or consort on nearly every royal throne of Europe” (“The Empire of Charles V in Europe,” in Volume 2 of *The New Cambridge Modern History*, 1958).

The geographic spread of his lands and family members and the responsibilities he accepted were the reason for his almost constant travels to the various parts of his empire and beyond. Charles's territorial possessions amounted to the largest of any European power between 400 and 1800, stretching from Peru in the west to the Philippines in the east. It was truly an empire on which the sun never set.

## EARLY INFLUENCES

Charles was born in the Flanders city of Ghent in 1500 but was soon practically orphaned. His father, Philip the Handsome, son of Emperor Maximilian I, died in 1506; and his mother, Joanna, the mentally disturbed daughter of Ferdinand II and Isabella I "the Catholic" of Spain, spent most of her life in seclusion. Charles was brought up in Flanders by one of his godmothers, his aunt Margaret of Austria.

As a young child, the prince was received into the Order of the Golden Fleece, a Burgundian institution founded in 1430 to give the ruling aristocracy opportunities for knightly valor in defense of land and religion. The induction would have coincided with the wishes of the man who became a father figure to Charles from the age of nine, William of Croy, Lord of Chièvres. He encouraged the young prince in the Burgundian cult of chivalry, with its Catholic Christian missionary ideals.

Another major influence in Charles's life was Adrian of Utrecht, appointed his tutor in 1506. A carpenter's son, Adrian had become a scholastic theologian and professor among whose students was the Dutch Bible translator Erasmus (who for a time was also an advisor to the young Charles). Adrian eventually became a bishop and a Spanish grand inquisitor and continued as Charles's spiritual counsel during the latter's first years as king in Spain. With Charles's assistance, he became Pope Adrian VI in 1522. On that occasion, records Flemish historian Wim Blockmans, the king wrote to him, "With the papacy in your hands and the Empire in mine I think that great things can be wrought through our unanimous actions. The love and obedience I bear you are no less than that of a good son towards his father" (*Emperor Charles V: 1500–1558*).

## MANY TIMES A KING

In 1506, on his father Philip's death, Charles had inherited Franche-Comté and the provinces that later came to be known as the Netherlands, as well as claim to the duchy of Burgundy (which had been seized by France in 1477). But because he was only six, his aunt Margaret was appointed as regent and served until 1515, when Charles was declared of age.

Following the death in 1516 of his maternal grandfather, Ferdinand, Charles and his mother were declared the new "Catholic kings" of Spain. In 1517 he traveled to that country to claim his inheritance. However, his mother's mental condition was such that, though they were corulers, Charles effectively became sole monarch. *He was helped in the task by his grand chancellor, the brilliant Piedmontese lawyer Mercurino Arborio di Gattinara.* Initially Charles's inability to speak Spanish as yet, together with his Flemish manners and his preference for Burgundian appointees, made him unpopular.

In 1519 his paternal grandfather, Emperor Maximilian, died. Charles had been seeking election as his successor as holy Roman emperor, a process initiated on his behalf a year earlier by Maximilian himself. For now, Charles would have to leave Spain. In response to Spanish opposition to funding his imperial ambitions, Gattinara wrote a speech defending the need to travel to Germany, which the king delivered to the Spanish parliament in 1520. Blockmans quotes part of Charles's speech: "This decision had to be made out of respect for the faith whose enemies have become so powerful that the peace of the commonwealth, the

honor of Spain and the prosperity of my kingdoms can no longer tolerate such a threat. Their continued existence can only be assured if I unite Spain to Germany and the title of Caesar to that of King of Spain.” He then left Spain for three years.

## EMPEROR-ELECT

The pursuit of the imperial title brought Charles into competition with the French king, Francis I, who also sought the office. Even Henry VIII of England (whose wife at the time was Charles’s aunt Catherine of Aragon) considered entering the race. German historian Gertrude von Schwarzenfeld writes that each monarch’s attraction to the imperial throne “shows how, in the age of humanism, the super-national character of the imperial idea was once more admitted. With the rediscovery of antiquity men remembered the old Roman Empire.” The Renaissance was based in part on this return to the values of Greece and Rome, and its associated humanist agenda was supportive of pan-European unity.

Bankrolled by various great European capitalist families, Charles was able to outbribe Francis with the electors. Despite what appears to have been a late attempt on Pope Leo X’s part to promote the Duke of Saxony, Charles’s appointment by unanimous vote as Roman king and emperor elect of the Holy Roman Empire on June 28, 1519, put a potential revival of Roman ideals into the hands of the Habsburgs. Biographer Karl Brandi records what Gattinara wrote to the new emperor on his election: “Sire, God has been very merciful to you: he has raised you above all the Kings and princes of Christendom to a power such as no sovereign has enjoyed since your ancestor Charles the Great [Charlemagne]. He has set you on the way towards a world monarchy, towards the uniting of all Christendom under a single shepherd” (*The Emperor Charles V*, 1939).

In October 1520, in keeping with the traditions of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles was crowned Roman king in Charlemagne’s capital of Aachen (see *Part 3 of “Messiahs!” in the Fall 2005 issue*). At the beginning of the ceremony, records historian Friedrich Heer, Charles kissed the cross of the Empire, which dated from the time of Charlemagne’s grandson Lothar (840–55). Significantly, the crucifix was inlaid with a cameo of Caesar Augustus on one side and Christ on the other. Before the altar, Charles prostrated himself and swore to defend the Catholic faith, to protect the Church, to recover the possessions of the empire, to protect the weak and defenseless, and to submit to the pope and the Roman church. Once Charles had affirmed his intentions, the princes and representatives of the people were asked to acclaim him ruler in the Roman imperial tradition by raising their hands and shouting aloud. The electors handed Charles the sword of Charlemagne; the archbishops of Cologne and Trier anointed him, dressed him in Charlemagne’s coronation robes, and gave him the orb and scepter; and the archbishop of Cologne placed the imperial crown of Otto the Great on his head (see *Part 4 of “Messiahs!” in the Winter 2006 issue*). Charles then sat on Charlemagne’s throne and took Communion.

## THE BATTLE FOR PEACE

With a vast territory to rule and deep Roman Catholic convictions, Charles wanted peace to come. But his 37-year rule was affected by circumstances that made conflict inevitable. As the defender of Catholic Christianity, he wrestled for most of his tenure with the growing unrest unleashed by Martin Luther’s call for radical reform within the church.

In addition, Charles’s enduring rivalry with Francis I of France over lost territories made conflict between the Habsburgs and the Valois a feature of most of his reign. To the east, the threat from the expansionist Ottoman Empire brought the emperor face-to-face with the Turks in the Mediterranean, Italy and eastern Europe. Both theaters of conflict were made more challenging and costly by expensive advances in warfare. And while Spain’s recently

acquired access to the gold and silver mines of Central and South America ought to have given Charles an edge, his obligatory travels and his sometimes unnecessary campaigns put him in continual financial jeopardy.

When the emperor-elect attended the diet meeting in Worms in 1521, he was one of two men with the same goal of religious reform (though by very different methods), who met for the first time. Charles, who according to Heer described himself to the assembly as descended from “the christian emperors of the noble German nation, from the Catholic kings of Spain, from the archdukes of Austria, from the dukes of Burgundy, all of whom remained until death the faithful sons of the Roman Church and constant defenders of the Catholic faith,” was just 21. His counterpart was the 37-year-old Augustinian monk and professor of theology at Wittenberg University, Martin Luther. Four years earlier he had put forward his 95 theses expressing doctrinal and ecclesiastical propositions, which ran counter to the rule of the Vatican.

Disagreement with Rome was not new in Germany. For a hundred years, church officials had objected to papal interference in their affairs. But with the flowering of dissent in what became the Spanish Netherlands (corresponding roughly to Belgium and Luxembourg today), Pope Leo X had decreed through the Fifth Lateran Council in 1515 that printed materials could spread heresy and must henceforth be approved by the church. In response, records Blockmans, Charles issued three edicts—in 1517, 1519 and 1520. Of great concern to him were Luther’s own widely circulated works and his anti-papal behavior: he had publicly burned the pope’s letter of excommunication and a copy of church law. Blockmans notes that in March 1521, referring to himself as the “greatest protector and upholder of the Universal Church,” Charles commanded that heretical works be burned in public places of punishment to the sound of trumpets.

The emperor was determined to deal with the growing threat to law and order and commanded Luther to attend the meeting in Worms. At the diet Luther refused to recant (“popes and councils are not credible because they are known often to have erred and contradicted themselves”). The resulting Edict of Worms condemned possession or even reading of Luther’s works and again required their public burning. But because the emperor adhered to the Burgundian code of chivalry, he had guaranteed Luther safe conduct to and from the diet.

In Germany, the Peasants’ War (1524–26) over social and economic inequalities was a direct outcome of the unrest brought about by Luther’s actions, though he himself condemned the perpetrators.

## **IMPERIAL PRECEDENTS**

Koenigsberger remarks that Gattinara, the Roman lawyer, not only viewed Charles as a new Charlemagne but also referred to him as “following the path of the good emperor Justinian”—no doubt in the hope that Charles would similarly reform law and simplify legal process (*see Part 3 of “Messiahs!”*). That way “it would be possible to say that there was one emperor and one universal law.” Gattinara believed that Charles’s imperial title was “ordained by God himself . . . and approved by the birth, life and death of our Redeemer Christ.” The language was consistent with his philosophy. As Charles’s political tutor and personal advisor, Gattinara promoted the Roman-Italian-imperial ideology of the proto-Renaissance writer Dante Alighieri, who viewed Italy as the essential center of imperial power. This created a significant context for Charles’s accession to the imperial throne.

From 1522 to 1529 Charles made Spain his home for the first time. It was from Barcelona in late July 1529 that he began his journey to Italy for his imperial coronation by Pope Clement

VII. Relations with the papacy had been severely disrupted in 1527, when to Charles's great embarrassment his commanders lost control of his underpaid troops and they sacked Rome, proceeding then to hold the pope prisoner for seven months.

Now, in an effort to placate Italian sensibilities and regain popularity, Charles adopted a new image. Following the advice of Gattinara, he refashioned himself as the incarnation of a Roman emperor. His chancellor was not the only one to give such counsel. In 1529, Charles's court chaplain, Antonio de Guevara, wrote a political treatise on the second-century Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180), recommending him as a model for his master.

It seems that Italy was as ready for an emperor as Charles was to become one officially. The time had come to impress his status on the public in a new way: "the imperial entry"—triumphal processions, in ancient Roman style, through the empire's towns and cities—was introduced. When Charles's ships arrived in the harbor of Genoa, not only did he look Roman, but he was greeted by a reconstruction of an ancient Roman triumphal arch embellished with the Habsburg double-headed eagle. Another copy of a triumphal arch adorned the cathedral. When the emperor-elect entered Bologna for the coronation, the procession passed by portraits of Caesar, Augustus, Titus and Trajan, placed side by side with his own insignia.

Not only was Charles successor of Roman emperors but also defender of the faith and soldier of God in the tradition of Charlemagne's restored empire of 800. Following medieval precedent, on February 22, 1530, the pope placed the iron crown of Lombardy on Charles's head. Two days later he installed him as emperor—the last time a holy Roman emperor would be crowned by a pope, though the empire was to survive for almost another 300 years.

On his way to Germany in June, Charles stayed at Innsbruck. It was there that Gattinara died. The unity of the empire for which the chancellor had worked long and hard lost its catalyst. Though he was now mature, Charles was deprived of his most imperially minded advisor and appointed two less powerful secretaries of state to take his place. But as we will see, Charles never gave up on the religious and imperial ideals encouraged in his formative years by Erasmus, Gattinara, Guevara and others.

In 1536 he entered Rome in triumph as one of his forebears of old had done, riding along the ancient *Via Triumphalis* on a white horse and clad in a purple cape. According to art historian Yona Pinson, "Charles had re-established himself as the legitimate successor to the Roman Empire" in the image of Marcus Aurelius, as a conqueror mounted on a horse ("Imperial Ideology in the Triumphal Entry into Lille of Charles V and the Crown Prince [1549]," in Volume 6 of *Assaph Studies in Art History*, 2001).

## **ENEMIES WITHOUT AND WITHIN**

A continuing preoccupation of Charles's reign following Gattinara's death was the growing Protestant revolt. Though the emperor's attention was often diverted by the French and Turkish threats—reason enough to avoid the widening religious and political split within Germany—both Charles and the Protestants were frustrated in their attempts to get the papacy to address reconciliation through reform. The emperor tried to persuade the Vatican to authorize a council to discuss all matters relating to German ecclesiastical complaints, but as Heer remarks, "Charles V, the most Catholic emperor the world has ever seen, found in the popes his most formidable adversaries." And although Charles himself was never inclined to doctrinal change, his counterparts were never inclined to settle matters without it.

From June through September 1530, Charles presided over the fractious Diet of Augsburg, where the statement that became the doctrinal basis of all Protestant groups, the Confession of Augsburg, was first read. Thus Charles's attempt at forging reconciliation inadvertently produced the foundational document of the Protestant rift with Rome.

In 1545 Pope Paul III finally convened a long-awaited council for its first meeting in the imperial city of Trent in northern Italy. But two years later, Charles, tired of opposition from some of the Protestant princes, took up arms and defeated them at the battle of Mühlberg. In his triumph, he is reputed to have repeated Julius Caesar's words following a military conquest in Asia Minor: "*Veni, vidi, vici*"—"I came, I saw, I conquered."

Titian's celebratory painting of the emperor's victory shows him once more on horseback, carrying the highly symbolic Carolingian Holy Lance, which contained what were believed to be parts of reliquary nails from Christ's crucifixion: the defender of the Catholic faith had triumphed with his Savior's help. Titian's portrait was more propagandistic than realistic, however, as Charles had actually carried a very different, short spear into the battle.

His victory at Mühlberg notwithstanding, Charles was not of a mind to crush Protestantism. He knew that he could never succeed. Thus, in 1555, the Peace of Augsburg gave imperial recognition to the Confession of Augsburg, providing freedom of religion to German princes and their territories and to free cities.

By the end of the century, 37 years after the final meeting of the Council of Trent, most of the abuses that had brought about the Protestant Reformation had been overcome, but by then doctrinal differences were entrenched and Europe would no longer be united by Catholicism. The Council had also signaled the beginning of the Counter-Reformation, through which the Catholic Church seized the initiative and instituted the Holy Office of the Inquisition. The cruel suppression of those who accepted contrary doctrine not sanctioned by their prince could only heighten the division between German Catholics and Protestants, which eventually erupted in the Thirty Years' War (1618–48). What Charles had sought to avoid by discussion and reconciliation—violent disunity in Christendom—became the next century's hallmark.

## **SETTING THE STAGE FOR SUCCESSION**

In 1548 Charles's pursuit of dynasty and empire was mirrored in a new series of imperial entries into major cities, beginning once more in Genoa and concluding in Antwerp a year later. The purpose of these processions was to introduce Philip, Charles's only legitimate son and heir, to his future subjects in the context of imperial ideology. Typically the entries were decorated by triumphal arches in Roman style, and with various floats and *tableaux vivants* (living pictures) illustrating scenes from the emperor's successful rule.

According to Pinson, Charles and Philip's 1549 entry into Lille in northern France was particularly impressive in a politico-religious sense, demonstrating "militantly Catholic propaganda." The "image of the ideal emperor" was on display as "Charlemagne's true heir and successor, Defender of the Church and the Faith," fused with "Caesar as the ruler of the world (*Domine Mundi*)." Charles's military victories over enemies within and without the empire were celebrated in the elaborate decorations, with overt references to ancient Roman conquerors as well as to classical pagan and biblical themes. By association Charles was Titus, defeating the anti-Christian Jews and destroying Jerusalem and its temple in 70 C.E. He was "a Christian savior accompanied by Mars and Neptune on the one hand and by theological virtues on the other." He was also the biblical Gideon, destroyer of the pagan altar of Baal in the time of the Judges and possessor of the miraculous woolen fleece (this biblical reference was conflated with Charles's patronage of the chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece). All of the processions depicted and celebrated the idea of succession from father to

son: Abraham and Isaac; David and Solomon; Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great; Vespasian and Titus. In each of the imperial entries, Charles's mantle was falling on Philip the faithful son.

The task of ruling an empire on which the sun never set, with a mindset no longer appropriate to the war-torn and religiously fragmented times, brought a weary Charles to the point of abdication. In 1555 he resigned from his responsibilities in the Netherlands and in 1556 also assigned Spain to Philip. That same year he decided that his brother Ferdinand I should be offered the imperial crown. Ferdinand became emperor two years after Charles retired to a Spanish monastery, San Jerónimo de Yuste in Extremadura, where he lived as a private citizen until his death on September 21, 1558.

## THE EMPIRE GOES WEST

In his political testament to his son, Charles urged Philip to strive for peace but not to fully renounce his right to Burgundy, "our fatherland." As we have seen previously, Burgundy comprised part of the "Middle Kingdom"—the same remnants of the western Roman Empire that consumed Otto the Great's energies following the collapse of Charlemagne's realm—and became instrumental in various attempts to restore Rome's centripetal power.

Gradually over the next two centuries the center of gravity shifted westward, but not as Charles had hoped. It was the Atlantic nations of France, Britain and America that now extended their power internationally. As a consequence, the Holy Roman Empire became less and less influential, its emperorship more and more ceremonial—that was, until the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, whose aspirations to become the new Charlemagne operating from French soil brought him face-to-face with the final Habsburg holy Roman emperor, Francis II. We take up Napoleon's attempt at empire next time in Part 6.

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## PART 6

### “I Am Called to Change the World”

The six thousand dignitaries and diplomats attending the ceremony inside Notre Dame Cathedral in December 1804 were witness to the culmination of an extraordinary man’s rise to total power from relatively humble origins. In an imperial extravaganza costing an estimated \$20 million in today’s money, Napoleon Bonaparte became Napoleon I, “by the grace of God and the Constitutions of the Republic, Emperor of the French.” The ambitious military careerist, supporter of the French Revolution, hero of the 1796–97 Italian campaigns, and First Consul, now elevated himself above the hereditary kings whose *ancien régime* he had rigorously opposed a few years earlier. Taking the crown from the hands of Pope Pius VII and placing it on his own head, the new sovereign signaled that he would be under no one’s authority, religious or otherwise. Sidelined, the pope could only offer a blessing and an embrace, quietly disappearing before the oath of office was performed.



“Charismatic leader, master of war and peace, restorer of Catholicism as state religion, a messiah taking unto himself the symbols of both the Republic and the Roman emperors . . .”

—Gerard Genyembre, *Napoleon: The Immortal Emperor*

Napoleon’s colossal arrogance was guaranteed to inflame some Europeans. Beethoven, for one, did not approve of the transformation from man of the people to imperial icon. Once a staunch supporter, in fiery indignation he scratched out the title to his Third Symphony. We know it not as *Bonaparte*, as originally conceived, but as *Eroica*, in dedication to heroism in general and “to celebrate the memory of a great man”—perhaps the earlier Bonaparte of the composer’s admiration, or more likely Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, who had died a hero the previous year.

Beethoven’s diametrical responses—great appreciation and profound dislike—were not atypical of the range of emotion Napoleon engendered, sometimes even in reverse. Take, for example, the British military doctor Barry O’Meara, who was one of those who attended to Napoleon during his final exile on the remote South Atlantic island of St. Helena. At first the prisoner’s enemy, he became an unabashed devotee.

How did “Le Petit Caporal” become, in French literature scholar Gérard Gengembre’s words, “charismatic leader, master of war and peace, restorer of Catholicism as state religion, a messiah taking unto himself the symbols of both the Republic and the Roman emperors,” yet also the seemingly heartless commander who abandoned his *Grande Armée* in the freezing Russian winter of 1812? Gengembre quotes the French novelist Stendhal, who, though he served as a soldier in that campaign, wrote, “I am filled with a kind of religious sense merely by daring to write the first sentence in the history of Napoleon. He is quite simply the greatest man who has come into the world since Julius Caesar.” How, following his exile and death in 1821, did the emperor reemerge, in Chateaubriand’s words, as a “hero of fantasy,” the “Charlemagne or Alexander of medieval epic”?

The subject of more than 100,000 books, Bonaparte’s story still fascinates two centuries later. How did he do it?

At one level there was the fortuitous favor of friends and mentors, convenient opportunity, the public’s gravitation toward the leader it seeks, romantic sensibility, and the human proclivity to create legends. At the personal level, the answer surely lies in a combination of Napoleon’s military and administrative talent, overweening ambition, opportunism, and self-propagandizing. The latter, involving careful control of his image, was one of the tools he and his supporters used to great effect to further his goals, consolidate his hold on power and promote his deification. From 1796, when he orchestrated gratitude and respect for his victories in Italy, to the managed accounts of his campaigns from 1805 to 1815 (*Bulletins de la Grande Armée*), to the famous battle paintings, to the founding of a dynasty, Napoleon directed his own publicity for maximum effect. Even French historian Emmanuel Las Cases’s *Mémorial de Sainte Hélène* (1823)—the posthumously released memoirs from the emperor’s first year and a half in final exile—played its role. It became a kind of sacred text to his admirers.

## THE PATH TO GLORY

Born in Ajaccio, Corsica, in 1769, the second surviving child of a minor Corsican-Tuscan lawyer-nobleman, Napoleone Buonaparte (he adopted the spelling “Bonaparte” only in 1796) was hardly destined by lineage to rule most of Europe. In 1779, his father took advantage of the recent French annexation of Corsica and sent him to school in Brienne, France, where he spent five and a half years before nomination to a finishing year at the Military School in Paris.

His graduation in September 1785 came eight months after the death of his father. Though he was not the eldest son, Napoleon was chosen as head of the family before his 16th birthday. Returning to Corsica a year after his commissioning, he remained until mid-1788, when he rejoined his regiment on the cusp of the French Revolution. His political views had developed to the point of feeling that political change had to come, though his military career seems to have prevented his support of social upheaval. Developments at home led to several visits and attempts to win favor with the Corsican patriot leader Pasquale Paoli. In 1791, Napoleon’s election to lieutenant colonel in the Corsican National Guard led to friction with Paoli, its commander-in-chief, who eventually anathematized the entire Buonaparte family for opposition to Corsican independence, forcing their flight to France in 1793.

Taking up his military duties again, Napoleon came to the attention of Maximilien Robespierre, leader of the republican Jacobins, through the latter’s brother Augustin, who was commissioner of the army. In late 1793, en route to Italy, Napoleon and his artillery unit were seconded to help drive the British out of Toulon. Against great odds the task was accomplished, and Napoleon continued to help in the region for several months.

Eventually Augustin Robespierre wrote to his brother about the young officer's "transcendent merit." As a result, Napoleon was promoted in 1794 to brigadier general and commandant of the French army's artillery in Italy. But he fell into disfavor a few months later when Maximilien Robespierre was ousted and guillotined in Paris and "the Directory" became France's five-man ruling elite.

At the end of 1795, Napoleon defeated a royalist uprising in Paris and was rehabilitated. His promotion to commander of the army of the interior soon led to commander-in-chief of the French army in Italy, where he waged a highly effective year-long campaign against Austria culminating in the 1797 Treaty of Campo Formio. Signing on behalf of France, Napoleon was instrumental in securing French possession of the Austrian Netherlands (modern-day Belgium) and a commitment to the left bank of the Rhine, subject to ratification by the German electors of the Holy Roman Empire.

Convinced of the need to overcome the British next—the theme of the rest of his career—the young general planned an invasion of Britain. When the scheme was canceled, he sailed with the support of the Directory to Egypt, where it was thought a French colonial presence could be established. If successful, this would limit British power in the eastern Mediterranean and challenge their position in India. Though he gained initial victory against the Mamluks in July 1798, the campaign turned into a disaster when the British admiral Horatio Nelson destroyed the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile in Aboukir Bay.

Despite the expedition's ultimate defeat (the French were forced to withdraw completely from Egypt in 1801), Napoleon's reputation soared at home. Reading the public's disillusion with the Directory, one of its leaders, Emmanuel Sieyès, arranged the coup that brought Napoleon to power as a member of the three-man Consulate in 1799. It was a short step to his declaration as First Consul in 1801 and Consul for life in 1802, and his elevation to emperor two years later.

## DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

Concurrent with his rapid elevation, the theme of Napoleon as savior—either Roman or Christian—began to appear in works of art. In an attempt to offset reports that during the Egyptian campaign Napoleon had abandoned his plague-ridden French soldiers in Palestine, in 1804 Antoine-Jean Gros painted *Bonaparte at the Pesthouse of Jaffa, 11 March, 1799*. The military leader is depicted visiting his dying men and touching one with an ungloved hand in the manner of Christ healing the sick, while a doctor looks on, covering his face so as not to breathe in the infected air. As Gengembre observes, "The painting contributed to the divinization of the master," which by 1804 was in full flight.

Three months before his imperial coronation, Napoleon visited Charlemagne's tomb at Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) and spent time there in meditation. His fascination with the "Father of Europe" was profound to the point, perhaps, of imagined reincarnation. A few years later in 1809, he told some papal representatives: "Take a good look at me. In me you see Charlemagne. *Je suis Charlemagne, moi! Oui, je suis Charlemagne!*" The ninth-century ruler's influence was evident in a number of ways at the coronation ceremony. The official crown was a copy of the one Charlemagne had worn, while his sword was also used in part of the ceremony. And in his left hand Napoleon held the holy Roman emperor Charles V's scepter, surmounted with a likeness of Charlemagne. The official paintings of the occasion show Napoleon as a Roman emperor, sometimes with a victor's laurel wreath fashioned from gold.

The extensive modeling of things Roman would not have been a surprise to many. Roman themes were already present in government attire immediately before Napoleon came to

power. The painter Jacques-Louis David designed the costumes worn by the Directory and Consulate governments, based on ancient Roman dress: white togas and sashes of office. Paintings from the time of the Consulate onward show Napoleon with a hair style in the manner of the Roman emperor Titus. Following the proclamation of the empire, Napoleon adopted the Roman eagle, with wings outspread, as the national symbol. His regiments carried their colors on staffs surmounted by such eagles, presented in person by the emperor.

Napoleon was enthralled with his destiny, and like other French leaders before him, he was sure that he was meant to rule not only the French people but also the Holy Roman Empire. In 1804, in response to the Napoleonic proclamation of empire, the Habsburg king, Francis II, had assumed the title “hereditary emperor of Austria” and defender of the German people. Defeated by Napoleon’s armies and deserted by several German princes, Francis realized that he could not sustain his position for long. But rather than allow Napoleon to usurp the Holy Roman Empire, he dissolved the entity on August 6, 1806, becoming Francis I of Austria. It was now impossible for anyone, especially a Frenchman, to claim the imperial title. But this did not hold Napoleon in check for long, intent as he was on dynasty and world dominion. Between 1792 and 1815 France was at war with four colonial powers: the Spanish, the Dutch, the Portuguese and the British. Napoleon’s aggression took his forces to almost every corner of the world. At the time, the conflict was thought of as the “Great War”—an almost continuous engagement, the scope of which some say qualified the period as the real First World War.

In 1810 Napoleon divorced his wife Josephine, who had failed to provide him with an heir. The same year he married 18-year-old Marie-Louise of Austria by proxy, then by civil and religious ceremony in France. The daughter of Francis I, she was conscious of her duty as a Habsburg to prevent her father’s loss of the throne and was optimistic about a new life in Paris, and so she happily agreed to the marriage. In 1811, the new empress of the French provided Napoleon with the son he desired. The infant was named Napoleon and designated from birth as king of Rome.

## **USING AND ABUSING RELIGION**

The emperor’s view of religion was in place long before the day of his imperial coronation in 1804. As a schoolboy in France, he had been tutored daily in Catholic doctrine. Historian J.M. Thompson notes that there were “three chapel services a day, beginning with mass at six in the morning; catechism on Sundays, confession on Saturdays, and Communion six times a year.”

Yet Napoleon was never an overly religious person; he saw religion’s value only in political terms. Following the French Revolution, Protestantism had made inroads in France, but Napoleon, appreciative though he was of the Protestants’ help, needed to legitimate his rule by restoration of the nation’s historic relationship with Rome. Balancing these elements, the Concordat signed with the Vatican in 1801 recognized Catholicism as the nation’s primary religious identity, kept the papacy out of French political life, and allowed some freedom of religion. The agreement was not so much a demonstration of Napoleonic piety as political necessity.

In 1804 Napoleon organized the canonizing of Neopolis, supposedly a Roman martyr from the time of Diocletian’s persecution of early Christians and now renamed St. Napoleon, patron of warriors. The new saint’s day, August 15, became France’s first national holiday and happened to coincide with the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the celebration of the Concordat, and Napoleon’s own birthday. It was clearly a modern form of Roman

emperor worship. As Gengembre notes, “it was the cult of Napoleon himself—restorer of religion, savior of the Church, anointed sovereign, living saint—who was celebrated.”

In May 1805 in Milan Cathedral, Napoleon gave a further indication of his intention to recover the wider ancient empire of the Romans. Once again at a coronation ceremony he took the crown into his hands—this time the “Iron Crown” worn by Charlemagne and named for the nail, supposedly from Christ’s crucifixion stake, forged into its inner band—and placed it on his own head. He was now king of Italy.

From this much more powerful position, he wrote a response in early 1806 to the pope’s threat to sever relations over French interference in Italy. In a separate cover letter, he told his uncle, the cardinal Fesch, “For the Pope’s purposes, I am Charlemagne. Like Charlemagne, I join the crown of France with the crown of the Lombards. My Empire, like Charlemagne’s, marches with the East. I therefore expect the Pope to accommodate his conduct to my requirements.” In April he pressed his new advantage over the pope by issuing his own version of the catechism (see “*Napoleon’s Imperial Catechism*”). The fact that he had gained the French church’s approval only made matters worse, setting the stage for further conflict with Pius VII.

The pope resisted Napoleon and for over three years was treated very harshly, to the point of imprisonment and extreme deprivation. For all intents and purposes, Pius excommunicated the emperor, who in turn threatened to depose the pontiff. The impasse was resolved by Napoleon’s defeat and exile to the island of Elba in 1814.

An insight into the difference between the two men is revealed in a detail from an account of the pope’s arrival back in Rome, as cited by historian Thompson: when Pius returned to the Quirinal palace, he found it redecorated by Napoleon, who had intended to use it as his own residence in 1811. One new frieze showed naked pagan goddesses, about which the pope is said to have commented, “We will give them a little more to wear and make Madonnas of them.” Napoleon’s attempt to diminish the papacy religiously and politically had not succeeded, and though he escaped from Elba in 1815 with a view to reclaiming his empire, the restored Pius outlived him by two years.

## THE LEGEND LIVES ON

Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo in June 1815 resulted in his banishment to St. Helena. His death there in 1821 was not the end of the failed emperor’s fame, however. It might be argued that his rehabilitation began with his journey into final exile on the island. Dictating his memoirs day by day to Las Cases, he began to position himself for immortality: “I have worn the Imperial crown of France, the iron crown of Italy, and now England has given me one even grander and more glorious—that worn by the savior of the world—a crown of thorns.” In 1825, Horace Vernet painted *Napoleon on His Deathbed*. The emperor wears a laurel crown, his face rejuvenated and Christlike, a crucifix adorning his chest.

The political-and-religious-savior imagery was only to take on further excesses. By 1840, the year that Napoleon’s ashes were brought from St. Helena and re-interred at Les Invalides in Paris, J.P.M. Jazet showed him rising from the tomb with military uniform and laurel wreath, and Victor Hugo wrote, “Sire you shall return borne high on a car / Glorious, crowned, sanctified like Charlemagne / And great like Caesar.”

It was just prior to the First World War that French novelist Léon Bloy expressed his unbounded adoration in “L’Ame de Napoleon” (“The Soul of Napoleon”), a part of which is provided in English in Gengembre’s work. Comparing the emperor to the returning Christ, he wrote, “Napoleon is . . . the prefiguration of Him who must come and who may not be too far

distant. . .” Bloy viewed him as “a gesture from God through the French so that people all over the world might not forget that there truly is a God and that He will come like a thief in the night, at an hour no one knows, with such utter astonishment that it will bring about the exinanition of the Universe.” He went on, “It was no doubt necessary that this gesture be undertaken by a man who scarcely believed in God and knew nothing of the Commandments.”

Art historian Elie Faure summed up this romantic identification with Christ, when in 1921 he wrote: “He stands apart like Jesus. . . . Christ and Napoleon act out their dream instead of dreaming their action. . . . Among all men, these two dared. Even unto martyrdom. Unto death.”

And so Napoleon’s apotheosis seemed complete. A century after his death, as the world entered the age of the great dictators, other admirers of Napoleon were on the European stage ready to take up the mantle of savior-god. In Part Seven, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler.

DAVID HULME

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## PART 7a

### Hearts of Darkness

As the foreign visitors stepped out of Les Invalides into the Parisian sunlight on June 23, 1940, a photographer captured the extraordinary scene. The man in the center was draped almost entirely in a long white coat, everyone else in black. According to architecture critic Deyan Sudjic, he was “a magic figure radiating light, like the Sun King hemmed in by lesser mortals lost in darkness” (*The Edifice Complex*, 2005). For this, his victory visit to Paris, Adolf Hitler had chosen to be accompanied not by Nazi military leaders but by two architects and a sculptor: Albert Speer, Hermann Giesler and Arno Breker.



“His appeal to German manhood was like a call to arms, the gospel he preached a sacred truth. He seemed another Luther. . . . I experienced an exaltation that could be likened only to religious conversion. . . . I had found myself, my leader, and my cause.”  
—Kurt Lüdecke quoted by Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris*

“Rome is our starting point and our point of reference; it is our symbol or, if you prefer, our myth. We dream of Roman Italy—wise and strong, disciplined and imperial. Much of the immortal spirit of ancient Rome is reborn in Fascism!” —Benito Mussolini, quoted by Peter Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican*

“Hitler wanted ancient Rome, and Speer did his best to provide it.” —Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex*

“If a German Mussolini is given to Germany . . . people would fall down on their knees and worship him more than Mussolini has ever been worshipped.” —Adolf Hitler, quoted by Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris*

The Führer had aspired first to become an artist, then an architect, but had failed the entry requirements for either course of study as a young man in Vienna. Now, after gazing down on the Tomb of Napoleon (the shrine of the would-be messiah of the previous century), he told his personal sculptor to design something much more impressive for him when his time came around—something people would literally have to look up to. Napoleon had tried to conquer the world and failed; Hitler was determined to succeed.

With the Nazi defeat of France avenging Germany’s crushing World War I humiliation, the Third Reich now stretched from the Atlantic to the border of Russia. On this day the resplendent and egomaniacal Führer could signal *his* readiness, as Sudjic notes, “to

redesign the world.” As humanity’s greatest architect, “Hitler wanted ancient Rome and Speer did his best to provide it.”

It’s a familiar desire among politicians of overweening ambition—this remaking of the map after the ancient Roman tradition. A few years earlier, another pretend-Apollo had claimed similar turf. The fascist Benito Mussolini—*Il Duce*—came to power as Italy’s prime minister a decade prior to Hitler’s appointment as Germany’s National Socialist chancellor. In April 1922, seven months before King Victor Emmanuel III asked him to form a government, the Duce gave a defining speech. He said in part: “Rome is our starting point and our point of reference; it is our symbol or, if you prefer, our myth. We dream of Roman Italy—wise and strong, disciplined and imperial. Much of the immortal spirit of ancient Rome is reborn in Fascism!”

According to Vatican scholar Peter Godman, by the time of this speech Mussolini’s rhetoric “had already acquired a mystical and messianic tone. . . . [He] wished to be regarded as a new Augustus, a second Caesar. . . . The task demanded a superman. Against the paradise that Mussolini aimed to establish on earth, were pitted the demonic foes of liberals, democrats, socialists, communists and (later) Jews. Yet he would triumph against these foes of mankind, for he was not only Caesar Augustus, but also the Savior.”

As they viewed it, the Führer and the Duce faced similar foes. They also shared similar delusions and public needs with similar needs. In his widely acclaimed biography of Hitler, historian Sir Ian Kershaw writes that by 1936, Hitler’s “narcissistic self-glorification had swollen immeasurably under the impact of the near-deification projected upon him by his followers. By this time he thought himself infallible. . . . The German people had shaped this personal hubris of the leader. They were about to enter into its full expression: the greatest gamble in the nation’s history—to acquire complete dominance of the European continent.” On the four-year road to Paris, Hitler occupied the Rhineland, annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia, and invaded Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. Just before the fall of France, Mussolini contributed troops to Hitler’s efforts in accordance with the pact that he and the Führer had signed.

Mussolini and Hitler were intent on recreating the world in response to what they saw as the challenges and opportunities of their times: the Bolshevik revolution, the aftermath of world war, economic and social instability, nationalistic fervor, and public demand for charismatic, problem-solving leadership. That their own psychological needs played a vital role in their attempts is undisputed, yet they would never have risen to the heights of power if significant proportions of their publics had not provided the necessary support.

It is horrific enough that Mussolini brought about the deaths of a million people, but the suffering Hitler wrought was unimaginable. And it is not simply the number of deaths he caused—of Jews alone approximately 6 million—but the pathological nature of his hatred and cruelty and the fact that he cared nothing for the individual, whether German or any other nationality. Humanity was his victim. In sum, the magnitude of the evil these two dictators perpetrated and the abject failure of their grandiose plans proved them false messiahs of the first order, leaving the survivors reeling at the edge of the abyss.

## **EARLY LIVES**

Mussolini was born in 1883 in Dovia, close to Italy’s northeastern Adriatic coast, the son of Alessandro, a blacksmith, and Rosa, a school teacher. His father was a political activist, a supporter of socialist causes and fond of drinking bouts; his mother was traditionally religious, educating her son in Roman Catholic doctrine.



Following in his father's footsteps, Benito was at first a socialist, rising to lead the left wing of the party. As editor of the socialist newspaper *Avanti*, he opposed Italy's war with Libya (1911–12). But when he suddenly became interventionist at the outbreak of World War I and supported his country's involvement, the party expelled him. Nationalism now took the place of socialism in his life. He started his own newspaper, *Popolo d'Italia*, and soon joined the army. Returning from the war as a corporal, he organized fellow veterans into a new right-wing militaristic organization, the *Fasci di combattimento*, dedicated to political terrorism and violent restoration of order. In 1921 he was elected to parliament as a member of the newly recognized National Fascist Party.

Six years after Mussolini's birth, Adolf Hitler was born in Braunau, on the Austrian border with Germany, the fourth child of a devoted, pious mother and a harsh, overbearing father. A compromised upbringing at the hands of Alois, a bad-tempered disciplinarian who enjoyed social drinking, and the overanxious, very attentive Klara played a significant role in the development of Hitler's adult psychological profile (though a definitive link with his later cold, incessant hatred of humanity remains elusive). His teenage years were unhappy and filled with failure as the family relocated often and he repeated one examination after another, eventually dropping out of high school. His father's death in 1903 over his morning glass at the local *weinhaus* didn't move him, but the premature death of his mother from breast cancer four years later left him grief-stricken.

Filled with delusions of grandeur, the young Adolf found it difficult to accept loss, correction or failure. Laziness, depression, anger and rage were his common responses to lack of success. Thus, when the declaration of World War I came, he saw it as an opportunity for personal achievement. Though he had avoided military service in Austria a year earlier, fleeing across the border to Munich, he now joined the Bavarian army. His bravery as a messenger with the rank of corporal at the western front was twice rewarded with the Iron Cross. Temporarily blinded by mustard gas in 1918, he recovered in a military hospital before returning to Munich to await demobilization.

Unable to find work, Hitler, along with other veterans, plunged into right-wing political life in the German Workers' Party. The war had increased his nationalist extremism, and now he blamed Germany's failure entirely on Jews and Marxists. His rhetorical abilities were soon recognized, and he began a meteoric climb to fame. By 1921 he was chairman of the newly named National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP or Nazi party).

At this point in their journeys neither Mussolini nor Hitler gave any indication of the immense impact they would shortly have on the entire world. Absent the particular postwar milieus of Italy and Germany, neither would have seen high office. It was the combination of certain public needs and the two men's individual aspirations in an extraordinarily unstable social order that allowed their totalitarian advents.

## **THE DUCE'S BLUFF**

Mussolini became prime minister following his much celebrated "March on Rome" in October 1922. But it was much less of an event than the Duce's propaganda made out. On his orders, four fascist leaders and their troops set out for Rome, while he stayed home in Milan ready to escape to Switzerland if plans went awry. King Victor Emmanuel later said that up to 100,000 of Mussolini's Blackshirts had converged from four directions on the city. Various fascist sources reported 50–70,000. The reality is that government forces halted about 20,000 ill-equipped, hungry, wet and bedraggled fascist soldiers, of whom about 9,000 later reached the city gates. According to German historian Martin Broszat, "in ancient and modern history, there was hardly any attempt on Rome that failed so miserably at its beginning."

It was a huge gamble, but despite the feebleness of the march, the Duce had won. Arriving in Rome by train on October 30, he accepted the timid king's invitation to become prime minister. So much for the vaunted "seizure of power." The myth was perpetuated, however, so that when Mussolini initiated his fascist calendar in 1927, October 28 (the anniversary of the March on Rome) was named New Year's Day and celebrated as a national holiday. March 23 became a holy day celebrating the beginning of fascism, and April 21 marked the birth of Rome.

## INSPIRING HITLER

Hitler and the Duce might have met much earlier than they did if Mussolini had been more open to his emulators to the north. While there were low-level contacts between German and Italian fascists—in all probability the Nazis even borrowed their salute from the Blackshirts (who in turn borrowed it from ancient Rome)—one Nazi supporter, playboy Kurt Lüdecke, did succeed in making contact with Mussolini himself just before the March on Rome. It was the first the Duce had heard of Adolf Hitler. For his part, Hitler, more and more impressed by Mussolini's success, hoped for a meeting or financial support and described him as "incomparable" and a "brilliant statesman." He was all the more pleased when his own supporters began to refer to him as Germany's Mussolini or even a new Napoleon.

In December 1922, the Nazi party organ, the *Völkischer Beobachter* (*National Observer*), said for the first time that Hitler was a special leader and *the* one that Germany awaited. The publicly expressed need was beginning to accord with Hitler's own ambitions. A few months later the paper's editor, Dietrich Eckhart, recognizing Hitler's overwhelming passion for leadership, told a friend that he had "megalomania halfway between a Messiah complex and Neroism." His comment was based on Hitler's observation that after a visit to Berlin, during which he was disgusted by its decadence, "I nearly imagined myself to be Jesus Christ when he came to his Father's Temple and found the money changers."

Though Hitler did not yet seem to think of himself as more than a John the Baptist to the needed savior, there was an indication of what was to come in late 1923, when he told London's *Daily Mail*, "If a German Mussolini is given to Germany . . . people would fall down on their knees and worship him more than Mussolini has ever been worshipped."

## CONDITIONS FOR CULTS

While Mussolini did not sink to the same depths of genocidal and bestial depravity as Hitler, there are many commonalities in their histories. Not least are those that arise from public desperation in difficult times. It is then that people give irrational support to radical voices, sometimes making mere men into gods. Mussolini biographer Richard Bosworth writes, "By 1914 many Italians were looking for a 'leader' to cut through the compromise, confusion and corruption which they detected all around and, if doubtless still among a restricted group, Mussolini was becoming known as a potential candidate for this role." But for Italy's entry into World War I in 1915, Mussolini the prime minister might have emerged earlier. In any case, it was but a few more years before Italians, desperate for a deliverer, were hearing about the leader whose deep commitment was to revitalize the nation, a man who walked heroically alone, or as Bosworth notes, "a man turning into a god."

As we have seen, in Germany similar yearnings emerged in the wake of the nation's postwar loss of face, its grief, despair, disillusion, social disruption and political instability, the harsh reparations visited on it by the Allies, and the consequent unemployment and inflation. The nation was ripe for radical appeals. As a generation of men and women honed by the violence of war and its privations brought their brutalities into "peacetime," Hitler found a voice to echo their innermost frustrations. Further, he found the money to finance his ascent.

As a lover of Richard Wagner's music from his youth, he chanced upon a connection with the wealthy Wagnerian community at Bayreuth, the Bavarian town where the famed composer spent the last years of his life. They proved to be one group of socialites that found Hitler endearing enough to give him financial support and access to more people of power.

## SETTING THE COURSE

Kershaw observes that it was the Duce's success in the March on Rome that encouraged Hitler in his attempt to seize power in Bavaria in November 1923, when he led the failed coup d'état known as the Munich Beer Hall Putsch. Reflecting on Mussolini's dubious achievement, Hitler had commented, "So will it be with us. We have only to have the courage to act. Without struggle, no victory!" He later reminisced, "Don't suppose that events in Italy had no influence on us. The brown shirt would probably not have existed without the black shirt. The March on Rome, in 1922, was one of the turning points of history"—eloquent testimony to the power of fascist propaganda.

But when the Munich coup collapsed and Hitler was sentenced to five years for treason, the Duce showed no inclination to develop a relationship with what seemed just another group of unsuccessful rightists seeking his patronage.

Though Hitler was to serve a total of only 13 months, his time in the reasonable comfort of Landsberg Prison allowed him to dictate the first draft of what would become the Nazi bible—his embittered autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*). There he spilled his venom against Jews, Marxists and Slavs, vented his frustrations against those who had punished Germany with their Versailles Treaty, worshiped power, and spelled out his plans for world domination. According to Kershaw, working on the book gave Hitler "absolute conviction in his own near-messianic qualities and mission." Using phrases from *Mein Kampf*, the biographer writes that by the time of Hitler's release from prison at the end of 1924, he had gained "the feeling of certainty that he was destined to become the 'Great Leader' the nation awaited, who would expunge the 'criminal betrayal' of 1918, restore Germany's might and power, and create a reborn 'Germanic State of the German nation.'" His twisted ideas of national redemption through the violent cleansing effects of a perverted religious science were set—and too many people were prepared to suspend their critical reasoning and listen.

Hitler was not the only Nazi writing in 1924. One of his admirers, Georg Schott, published a sycophantic book that spoke of him in terms of prophet, genius, religious person, political leader, man of will, educator, awakener, liberator, and a man of humility and loyalty. Kershaw comments that here Hitler "was turned into nothing short of a demi-god." Schott wrote further, "There are words which a person does not draw from within himself, which a god gave him to declare. To these words belongs this confession of Adolf Hitler . . . 'I am the political leader of the young Germany.'" Schott added, "The secret of this personality resides in the fact that in it the deepest of what lies dormant in the soul of the German people has taken shape in full living features. . . . That has appeared in Adolf Hitler: the living incarnation of the nation's yearning" (Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris*).

Though it would be still a few more years before he would attain dictatorial power, Hitler's course was now clear, and the ground, already fertile for the Führer cult, was about to receive its poisonous plant.

## RELIGIOUS MANIPULATION

Meanwhile in Italy, with Mussolini in office, the fawning language was getting worse. The degree to which public adulation was expressed in religious terms is evident from the words of an enthusiastic fascist in 1925, as recorded by British academic John Whittam: "A century

from now history may tell us that after the war a Messiah arose in Italy who began speaking to fifty people and ended up evangelizing a million; that these first disciples then spread through Italy and with their faith, devotion and sacrifice conquered the hearts of the masses" ("Mussolini and the Cult of the Leader," *New Perspective*, March 1998).

Some would soon make similar comments about Hitler. Kershaw mentions that the Nazis "went so far as to claim that the only historical parallel with Hitler, who had begun with seven men and now attracted a huge mass following, was that of Jesus Christ, who had started with twelve companions and created a religious movement of millions" (*The "Hitler Myth"*).

Clearly the fault lay not with Hitler alone. The people were moving toward him. They needed him and he needed their adulation. A man subject to such worship not only falls victim to it easily but may also begin to manipulate religious fervor in the service of the state.

The Duce was quite willing to moderate his anticlerical sentiments in the pursuit of complete power. Thus, according to Whittam, "Mussolini was prepared to use many of the symbols and rituals of Roman Catholicism—one of his first acts as premier was to restore the crucifix to all schoolrooms." But the social revolution that Mussolini sought would introduce believers to a new religion designed for the new fascist man and woman.

Once in power Hitler would also demonstrate cynical use of Christianity to further his quest. He aspired to create a new "positive Christianity," to bring German Catholics and Protestants together. Yet the central figure in his version of the faith was an angry Aryan Christ, certainly not the Jewish-born Messiah. Accordingly, once the Jews were annihilated, the "final task" of national socialism would be to terrorize what Hitler called "the rotten branch" of Christianity.

Thus, for neither leader would the cross be allowed to challenge the fasces or the swastika.

The Duce's political religion also required a new Rome and great public works in the existing city; after all, was he not to be recognized as the modern equivalent of Augustus? He was soon destroying churches and buildings and what he regarded as the accretion of art from centuries past. In their place would be fascist art and architecture. One plan called for a broad avenue leading to a new forum that would bear his name, where, reminiscent of Nero's construction of a giant image of the sun god with his own face, Mussolini planned an 80-meter-tall (about 260 feet) bronze statue of himself as Hercules. Though neither forum nor statue was completed, many public buildings, railway stations, post offices, universities and factories were built across the country. Included were shrines to fascist martyrs, complete with memorial flames and chapels in all fascist headquarters.

Many of Hitler's architectural fantasies also reflected a politico-religious undertone. He planned for a new world capital in Berlin named Germania. It was to be completed by 1950 in time for a world fair and included a dome accommodating 180,000 people and a nearly 118-meter-high (386 feet) triumphal arch in Roman style—more than twice the height of Napoleon's Arc de Triomphe. But why such outsize dimensions? Hitler explained it himself when he wrote, "That a monument's value resides in its size is a belief basic to mankind." Perhaps this is the reason, as psychotherapist George Victor notes, that "on coming to power, [Hitler] ordered a new chancellery built for him on so grand a scale that visitors would sense that they were in the presence of 'the Master of the World'" (*Hitler: The Pathology of Evil*, 1998).

## **THE DUCE AND THE POPE**

The Vatican was not pleased with Mussolini's removal of churches to make way for secular structures. But in 1929, the Duce's anticlerical stance seemed to soften slightly, and he

signed a concordat with the Vatican. Godman records that in appreciation of the agreement, the pope praised Mussolini as “the man of Providence,” whose conciliatory actions had restored “God to Italy, and Italy to God.” Paradoxically, his apparent support of the dictator seemed only to contribute to the latter’s adulation rather than focus the Italian public’s attention on God.

But had Mussolini really accommodated the pope or the church? Fascist followers continued to capitalize the personal pronoun when referring to Mussolini and, according to Godman, “groveled before their ‘spiritual father’ and ‘sublime redeemer in the Roman heavens,’ while proclaiming their belief in his infallibility.” The Duce “pretended to scorn these tributes, and silently encouraged them.” Further, the 1930 opening of a school of “mystical fascism” in Milan, with the purpose of furthering the leader cult, did nothing to demonstrate that Mussolini had discovered humility. In 1932, pressed for a definition of fascism, he wrote: “Fascism is a religious conception of life . . . which transcends any individual and raises him to the status of an initiated member of a spiritual society.” Clearly it was not the religion the pope was hoping to see encouraged. But this was the 10th anniversary year of the Duce’s appointment, and his glorification was in full swing.

Bosworth gives some examples: An Italian biographer, describing the role of the leader’s parents in his life, said, “Alessandro Mussolini and Rosa Maltoni only played the part of a John [the Baptist] toward Christ. They were the instruments of God and history, given the task of watching over one of the greatest national messiahs. Actually the greatest.” A leading fascist journalist commented that “the new Italy is called Mussolini” and spoke of “its infallible Chief,” claiming that “the Exhibition of the Revolution is Him [*sic*]: Mussolini.” Another wrote, “The name of Mussolini is known everywhere . . . as a symbol of power and perfection.” Even more amazingly, the Duce was said to be “omnipresent.”

While that word was not yet spoken about Hitler, to the north similar developments were taking place.

## **THE COMING OF THE TEUTONIC MESSIAH**

In 1932 Hitler was still a year away from becoming chancellor, though the 1930 elections had made the National Socialist Party the second-largest holder of seats in the parliament. February and March found him campaigning again, this time for the presidency. In a runoff, unconventionally and with great success he took to flying between rallies, the first politician to take to the air in campaigning. Again the National Socialist Party came in second, but with a huge increase in votes. At rallies for the April state elections, Hitler spoke at 25 locations around the country. Kershaw records that after one such event involving 120,000 people in the Hamburg area, a schoolteacher noted, “How many look to him in touching faith as the helper, saviour, the redeemer from overgreat distress.”

The 13 years ahead would show that nothing could be further from the truth.

Like Mussolini, Hitler would come to power by invitation. After much interparty wrangling, Germany’s president, Paul von Hindenburg, would ask him in January 1933 to take the post of chancellor. In July the Führer would agree to his own concordat with the Vatican, and in June 1934 he would meet Mussolini for the first time.

Soon the most horrifying time in modern history would descend on Germany, Italy and the world, as we will see next issue in “Messiahs! Rulers and the Role of Religion,” Part 7b.

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## PART 7b

### Dictators' Downfall

*What had taken Benito Mussolini three years in Italy took Adolf Hitler a mere three months in Germany. The Führer's brutal regime seemed to arrive almost fully developed early in 1933. Historian Fritz Stern writes, "In ninety days, a one-party state had been established and people had been stripped of rights that in the Western world had been thought inalienable for centuries." The Duce, on the other hand, had only gradually achieved his totalitarian state.*



#### SACRED POLITICS

Mussolini was invited to become prime minister in 1922. Leveraging an already existing Italian appetite for political religion in which the fatherland was considered divine, he embarked on the fantasy that his governmental system could solve all of Italy's postwar problems. His intended solution was centered on institutionalizing a fascist religion. Between 1925 and 1939, four party secretaries worked in succession to introduce the new quasi-religious order to a mostly willing Italian populace, with the goal of establishing the "New Man" of fascism.

According to historian Emilio Gentile, secretary Roberto Farinacci (1925–26) "helped install the régime with 'Dominican faith.'" His successor, Augusto Turati (1926–30), "preached the need to 'believe absolutely: to believe in Fascism, in the Duce, in the Revolution, as one might believe in the Divinity.'" With characteristic blind allegiance, Turati pronounced: "We accept the Revolution with pride, we accept these dogmas with pride; even if we are shown they are wrong, we accept them without argument." Not surprisingly, his 1929 catechism of fascism emphasized "the subordination of all to the will of a Leader."

Party secretary Giovanni Giurati (1930–31) encouraged the Fascist Youth organization to become both militant and missionary in character, in line with Mussolini's 1930 dictate, "Believe, Obey, Fight." Italian fascists believed that their movement had appropriated important characteristics of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1931, Fascist Youth secretary Carlo Scorza declared, however, that these religious traits did not include meekness and humility. Rather, he wrote, Mussolini's movement had learned much from the "great school of pride and intransigence"; Italy's fascists had adopted the methods of "those great and imperishable pillars of the Church, its great saints, its pontiffs, bishops, and missionaries: political and warrior spirits who wielded both sword and cross, and used without distinction the stake and excommunication, torture and poison—not, of course, in pursuit of temporal or personal power, but on behalf of the Church's power and glory."

With the appointment of party secretary Achille Starace (1931–39), Mussolini's civic religion reached its height. In 1936, notes Gentile, the Fascist Youth were instructed, "Always have

faith. Mussolini gave you your faith. . . . Whatever the Duce says is true. The Duce's words are not to be contested. . . . Every morning, after your 'Credo' in God, recite your 'I believe' in Mussolini."

"The proclamation of Hitler as a kind of messiah, a divinely-ordained personification of German destiny—was not merely an article of the Nazi faith but its necessary condition."

—David J. Diephouse, "The Triumph of Hitler's Will," in *The Cult of Power: Dictators in the Twentieth Century* (Joseph Held, Ed., 1983)

## MUSSOLINI THE DIVINE

Though Italian fascism did not begin with the cult of Mussolini, he had previously been accorded mythic stature as a socialist and wartime interventionist leader. His elevation to divinity came later, after 1925, as the new movement tightened its grip on Italy. Once the religion of fascism was securely installed, Mussolini could claim to be the center of its worship.

Gentile refers to *Il Duce's* form of rule as "totalitarian caesarism." As we have seen in this series, religious sentiments were manipulated by many of the Caesars, several of whom were deified. Some even demanded divinity while still alive. It comes as no surprise, then, that according to this same historian, the cult of the Leader made Mussolini the equivalent of the greatest emperors, Caesar and Augustus. Scholar Piero Melograni notes that Mussolini came to believe the hype himself and "claimed to be the heir, if not the actual reincarnation, of Augustus" ("The Cult of the Duce in Mussolini's Italy," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1976).

If that were not sufficient pedigree, he was also considered the equivalent of Machiavelli, Napoleon, Socrates, Plato, Mazzini, Garibaldi, Saint Francis of Assisi, Christ, and God Himself! Gentile adds that Mussolini became "statesman, legislator, philosopher, writer, artist, universal genius and prophet, messiah, apostle, infallible teacher, God's emissary, elect bearer of destiny, the man announced by the prophets of the Risorgimento. . . ."

As indicated, the major promoter of this adulation was Starace. He formalized the cult, even instructing that the word *Duce* always appear in capital letters. Following his appointment, attempts to impose institutionalized fascist religion on the general public knew no bounds. The fawning journalist Asvero Gravelli composed some extraordinarily effusive lines about the Leader, including, "God and history today mean Mussolini." It was not, however, fascism per se or its other leaders that inspired so many Italian people. Thus when Gentile quotes an anonymous informer ("Fascism is a religion, a religion that has found its God"), he means to emphasize the Duce's central role in fascism's appeal. It was the *person* of Mussolini himself that drew people, not "belief in the values and dogmas of the Fascist religion." Gentile adds the important thought that it was in part traditional Italian religious faith that made adulation of Mussolini so easily possible.

"[Mussolini] is all Hero, resplendent as the sun; the inspiring and creative Genius; the Leader who conquers and fascinates; He is the massive totality of myth and reality. . . . The Revolution is Him, He is the Revolution."

—O. Dinale, "La Mostra Della Rivoluzione. Lui: Mussolini," *Gioventù Fascista* (March 1, 1934), quoted by Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*

## THE USES OF RELIGION



To the north, in Germany, a similar melding of religious fervor, idolatry and political purpose was accelerated once Hitler came to office.

Asked by President Paul von Hindenburg to become chancellor at the end of January 1933, the Führer moved quickly to establish authoritarian control. Yet, in parallel with extreme brutality toward any opposition, he continued to assert that traditional values and legal means were central to his actions.

Historian Ian Kershaw notes that “once he had become Chancellor, Hitler’s language became pronouncedly ‘messianic’ in tone, and his public addresses were frequently replete with religious symbolism.” Themes of renewal and mission merged religious concepts with the Führer’s political purposes. In his first radio address as chancellor, he acknowledged Christianity “as the basis of our entire morality” and the family “as the germ of our body of nation and state,” and he ended with an appeal he would often use, asking “the Almighty” to bless the government.

A few days later at a party rally, in a speech broadcast live from Berlin to an estimated audience of as many as 20 million, Hitler introduced elements of the Protestant version of the Lord’s Prayer into his conclusion. He called on the audience to look forward to “the new German Reich of greatness and honor and strength and glory and justice. Amen.”

Despite his apparent religiosity, Hitler’s faith was quite different from that of the churches. But the atheistic side of Nazi philosophy was somehow successfully separated from his professed personal beliefs. Thus for a long time he managed to deceive the public and many church leaders into believing that Nazi actions against Christians were simply the excesses of some of his followers. Hitler had, of course, recognized that it would be premature to attack the Catholic and Protestant churches openly. His first goal was the destruction of the Jews, and only then what he called “the rotten branch of Christianity.” For the time being he needed church support among the population and aimed at controlling political Catholicism within the state.

Thus in July 1933, like Mussolini before him, he disingenuously entered a concordat with the Vatican. Quietly party opponents of the agreement, he privately told them that he needed to create “an atmosphere of harmony in religious matters.” Accordingly, he worked at convincing many leading church figures that he was a sincere Christian believer. As late as 1936, Cardinal Faulhaber, archbishop of Munich, wrote in a private memo, “The Reich Chancellor undoubtedly lives in belief in God.” With the Protestant churches, Hitler was less successful, though even many of their leaders were willing to encourage support for him among their members.

“In reporting Mussolini’s return from Munich, Fascist photographic journals displayed a *Duce* who was ‘the saviour of Europe’, and among the crowds true believers carried placards saying: ‘*Duce*, you are the father of humanity.’”

—R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini*

## **BELIEF MISHMASH**

Hitler’s personal beliefs were a strange amalgam. Baptized and raised a Catholic, he had apparently adopted aspects of pagan Nordic religion and distortions of biblical belief. According to Vatican scholar Peter Godman, he “saw himself as a redeemer . . . [and] claimed that his movement had discovered the true meaning of the New Testament. The Old Testament was to be excluded because it was ‘Semitic’; God’s law was to be identified with racism. Hitler portrayed himself as the prophet of this doctrine, which [he said] the Catholic Church had perverted.” Hitler’s idea was that the Aryan/Nordic race was superior. He said

that the New Testament was wrong about Jesus, asserting that he was not a Jew but actually of Nordic blood.

In his autobiographical *Mein Kampf*, he displayed his anti-Semitism openly, writing that “no one need be surprised if among our people the personification of the devil as the symbol of all evil assumes the living shape of the Jew.” By contrast, he said that his imagined German *völkisch* state “should consecrate [matrimony] as an institution which is called upon to produce creatures made in the likeness of the Lord.” Godman notes: “Demonizing the Jews, the Führer heroized himself as a savior and redeemer of Arian blood. A Christlike figure in the Germanic people’s struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ the Hitler of *Mein Kampf* spoke in apocalyptic tones.”

## **CONSOLIDATING POWER**

The opportunity for Hitler to bring about *dictatorial* rule came very soon after his taking office. And it came by chance in the wake of an attempt to burn down the Reichstag in late February 1933. Perpetrated by either a Bulgarian communist or a mentally unstable Dutchman with communist connections—historians still cannot agree—the arson was reason enough for Hindenburg to agree with the chancellor that the nation was now in grave danger from bolshevism. As a result, the president immediately signed emergency decrees suspending fundamental civic rights. Arrest of “suspects” without formal charge or access to legal counsel was now possible. Though largely unrecognized at the time, this “democratic” presidential action formed the legal basis of all the terror that descended on the inhabitants of German-controlled territory in the Nazi period.

But Hitler went further. Lacking a parliamentary majority, he asked the Reichstag for the power to rule by decree. Astonishingly, the parties agreed (with one exception, the Social Democrats), thereby relinquishing power to the presently cooperative chancellor, who was now on the fast track to becoming the all-powerful Führer. By March, the authorities had arrested 10,000 people in Bavaria—communists, socialists and democrats—and opened the first concentration camp on the outskirts of Munich at Dachau. By April, Prussian police had rounded up a further 25,000. The abolition of trade unions and the disappearance of all other political parties, voluntarily or by force, followed within Hitler’s first six months in office.

## **MEETING OF MINDS?**

In June 1934, the long-awaited face-to-face between Hitler and Mussolini—one of 17 such meetings—took place in Venice. It was the first time Hitler had ventured outside Germany as leader. He had admired the Duce for years, emulating him and even keeping a life-sized bust of his hero in his personal quarters at Munich’s Nazi headquarters, the Braun Haus. From Hitler’s point of view, Germany was Italy’s natural ally, counterbalancing Italy’s natural enemy, France.

But the meeting at a Venetian palace once owned by Napoleon disappointed both parties for personal reasons. Hitler objected to the city’s decadent art and its all-too-prevalent mosquitoes, while Mussolini was bored with the Führer’s one-way bombastic conversations. More significantly, the visit presaged the gradual sea change in their relationship. From now on Hitler would no longer be in the subordinate position. Over the next decade, this shift would contribute heavily to the Duce’s downfall.

## **TAKING CONTROL**

Two separate events soon assured Hitler’s complete control of Germany. On his return from Venice, he orchestrated the “Night of the Long Knives.” Moving ruthlessly against challengers within his own party, he ordered the murder of the leadership of the SA (*Sturm*

*Abteilung*, or Storm Troopers), including his former Munich compatriot, Ernst Röhm. The execution of two German army generals and a number of Jews came next. Heinrich Himmler's SS (*Schutzstaffeln*, or Protection Squad) carried out the entire purge. For his timely action in heading off what was presented as yet another "threat" to the nation, Hitler received official thanks from Hindenburg, though there is doubt that the president personally sent the message.

The second event was the death in August of the ailing president himself. A hastily introduced law had combined Hindenburg's role with Hitler's, making the cold-blooded chancellor supreme commander of the armed forces on the veteran leader's demise. Once the representative of the old guard was no longer there to impede Hitler's ambitions, the army confirmed his dictatorship by an oath of loyalty, despite the Führer's recent purge of two of its own.

### DEIFYING THE DICTATOR

By September practically all of Germany supported Hitler's new powers as head of state. At the annual party rally in Nuremberg that month, the party faithful idolized their Leader. Kershaw notes that while Hitler had been the center of the rally in previous years, "now he towered over his Movement, which had come to pay him homage." Leni Riefenstahl's infamous cult film of the occasion, *Triumph of the Will* (commissioned and titled by Hitler), was soon playing throughout Germany. The opening scenes show the Führer's plane descending through the clouds, casting a cross-shaped shadow on the marching troops in the streets below. Historian David Diephouse draws attention to this blatant "second-coming" imagery and the film's pervasive "tone of insistent messianism." At the conclusion of the film, deputy Führer Rudolf Hess is seen emphasizing the mystical unity of leader, party and people with the words, "The party is Hitler, but Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler. Hitler! Sieg Heil!"

By March 1936, the Führer seemed to have become convinced that he was in some kind of mystical relationship not only with the people but also with God. He had just succeeded in restoring the Rhineland to Germany by exploiting French weakness and British passivity and simply marching his troops into the demilitarized area. Feelings of infallibility began to overwhelm him. Speaking that month to a large crowd in Munich, he said, "I go with the certainty of a sleepwalker along the path laid out for me by Providence." Pseudo-religious terms began to dominate his speech.

Such language was not confined to Hitler. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels commented that when his master spoke at the final election rally in 1936, "one had the feeling that Germany had been transformed into a single great church embracing all classes, professions, and denominations, into which now its intercessor stepped before the high seat of the Almighty to provide testimony for will and deed." Goebbels himself seemed taken in by Hitler's messianic pretensions. In the same election campaign, he claimed to have experienced in the Führer's speeches "religion in the deepest and most mysterious sense of the word."

According to Kershaw, a few months later at the September Nuremberg rally, "messianic allusions from the New Testament would abound in his address to party functionaries." Hitler remarked to the vast crowd in a typical late-evening speech (his chosen time for major addresses): "How deeply we feel once more in this hour the miracle that has brought us together! Once you heard the voice of a man, and it spoke to your hearts; it awakened you, and you followed that voice. . . . Now that we meet here, we are all filled with the wonder of this gathering. Not every one of you can see me and I do not see each one of you. But I feel you, and you feel me! It is faith in our nation that has made us little people great. . . . You come out of the little world of your daily struggle for life, and of your struggle for Germany

and for our nation, to experience this feeling for once: Now we are together, we are with him and he is with us, and now we are Germany!”

Two days later, Hitler called on messianic references once more as he declared to his audience: “That you have found me . . . among so many millions is the miracle of our time! And that I have found you, that is Germany’s fortune!”

Since his appointment as chancellor, Hitler had been absorbed by domestic issues. Now that he had established the one-party state, disposed of his own Nazi challengers, set an economic revival in motion, and restored German sovereignty in the Rhineland, he could turn his attention to world conquest. (*For a more detailed discussion of Hitler’s colossal wartime brutalities, in which upwards of 6 million Jews—men, women and children—were systematically murdered, see “Lest We Forget” and “Final Solutions.”*)

### **DREAMS OF EMPIRE, ITALIAN-STYLE**

Down south, similar ambitions had long preoccupied the Duce. Mussolini had mulled over the idea of renewing the Roman Empire for many years. Ethiopia, sandwiched between the two Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland at the Horn of Africa, represented an opportunity. At the end of 1934, he wrote that force was now necessary to resolve a diplomatic impasse. A year later, Italian forces defeated the pathetically armed Ethiopians, bombing them with poison gas. Now the Duce could grandiosely declare that “Italy finally has its empire. . . . It is a Fascist empire, an empire of peace, an empire of civilization and humanity.” Hardly. Soon the newly established colonies in *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI) were overcome by waste, corruption and inefficiency, their distance from the fatherland a constant challenge.

Nevertheless, as a result of the “conquest,” according to historian Richard Bosworth, adulation of the “divine” leader flowed freely in Italy. Journalist Gravelli wrote a book emphasizing the Duce’s spirituality, in which he proclaimed “Homer, the divine in Art; Jesus, the divine in Life; Mussolini, the divine in Action.” Moreover, “[his] smile is like a flash of the Sun god, expected and craved because it brings health and life”; “To whom does he compare? No-one. The very act of comparison with politicians from other lands diminishes Him [*sic*].” Bosworth adds that in the opinion of another propagandist, “looking at [Mussolini] was like looking at the sun; the man could not be seen but rather ‘an immense flood of radiant vibrations from the ether.’”

### **THE AXIS**

In November 1936, Mussolini coined the term by which the allies in World War II came to know their fascist enemies. Speaking in Milan, he said that the relationship between Italy and Germany was “an axis around which all European states, animated by a desire for collaboration and peace, can revolve.” Mussolini had in mind that he and Hitler would divide continental Europe between them. The Nazis had proposed that he visit Germany, and he hoped that his stay would “signal not just the solidarity between the two regimes but also [the adoption of] a common policy by the two states which must be clearly delineated towards East and West, South and North.” By this he apparently meant that Italy would take care of the Mediterranean Basin, and Germany would concentrate on Eastern Europe and the Baltic.

In the summer of 1937, the fascists engaged in war games off Sicily, and the Duce took the opportunity to visit the region. By now the religious fervor had reached stratospheric heights. As Gentile relates, one zealous resident explained in anticipation: “*We await our father, the Messiah. He is coming to visit his flock, to instill faith. . . .*”

In late September, Mussolini made his first official visit to Germany. Bosworth records that before an audience of 800,000 in Berlin, the Duce proclaimed fascism and Nazism as “the

greatest and most authentic democracies existing in the present day world.” Doubling up on this contradiction, on his return home he began to wonder about incorporating racism into his political platform. It was an idea that would grow in the months ahead as Hitler’s reputation for decisive action began to eclipse Mussolini’s status as first leader of fascism.

When Hitler invaded Austria in March 1938 and forced its union with Germany, Italy’s acceptance of the aggression brought the Duce into disrepute with some of his own people. Some scholars believe that this act marked the end of Italian independence from Hitler.

Anxious to shore up his role within the state, Mussolini had himself declared “First Marshal of the Empire,” replacing the king as sole authority over the armed forces in wartime. But when the Führer came to visit Italy a second time in May, protocol required that the king (as head of state) and not the prime minister ride with him. This contributed to the growing public perception of Mussolini as Hitler’s second man. Fascism’s original voice was fast becoming the lesser partner.

Realizing the shift and desperate to keep pace with Nazi policies, the Duce now introduced various racial policies, with special reference to the Jews. Declaring true Italians to be of Aryan stock, Mussolini aligned himself with virulent anti-Semitism, though he had previously called it Nazi “anti-scientific drivel.” It was an example of naked expedience with horrific consequences. Italians saw fellow countrymen and women of Jewish and other “non-Aryan” origins prevented from marrying Italian “Aryans”; in 1943 more than 8,500 Jews were deported from Italian territory to death camps in Austria.

In February 1939, Italy and Germany signed a new commercial agreement, a clause of which provided for 500,000 Italian guest workers to help out in German industry. The slough of alignment was deepening. In May came the military alliance known as the “Pact of Steel.” But Mussolini, aware that war in Europe was inevitable, opposed an immediate declaration. He would have liked to postpone it until 1942 to give Italy time to shore up its woefully inadequate armed forces. Meeting Hitler at the Brenner border with Germany in March 1940, the Duce could make no commitment to war. Yet in June, sensing an opportunity to share in the spoils and gain French territory on the Italian border, he gave halting military support to Hitler’s already successful invasion of France.

However, fruitless military adventures in Greece later that year set the Duce on a downward path that saw him driven from Rome in 1944 as the allies moved northward from their invasion of Sicily, and he was stripped of his office by the king.

## **DOWNFALL AND DEATH**

In April 1945, partisans discovered the Duce—“Big Head,” as they named him—in the back of a truck while attempting escape to Switzerland and Germany. His capture led to an unceremonious execution by firing squad and the public display of his corpse in Milan, where former devotees spat on his remains. In the days before his death, he had confided that all was lost. Maintaining his messianic delusion nonetheless, he told an old friend, “I am crucified by my destiny. It is coming.”

In his Berlin bunker amid bombs and fire, Hitler heard of the Duce’s death. Two days later, alternating between despair and hope that his troops would yet break through the Russian advance and save him, he planned his final destructive act. With the blood of six million on his hands, and caring nothing about the ongoing suffering of the German people, the most hated figure in human history made ready for suicide.

The parallels between Mussolini and Hitler were many: elements of their childhoods, World War I experiences, disillusion with postwar conditions in their homelands, rightist politics,

anticommunist persuasions, brutality, delusions of grandeur. Certainly, as the Führer admitted, Mussolini inspired him, having come to power a decade earlier. But eventually Mussolini, to his chagrin, was eclipsed by his admirer. Perhaps the most telling similarity was the enormous pride with which each pursued his path. Kershaw subtitled the first volume of his biography of Hitler *Hubris*. He named the sequel after the Greek god of retribution, *Nemesis*, for the inevitable consequence of gargantuan pride. The same words surely describe Mussolini's life story.

After the Duce's downfall, party secretary Giovanni Giurati wrote that he had believed Mussolini "was the man destined to give life to Dante's idea: that the two great symbols, the Eagle and the Cross, would be brought together again in Rome, and that moral and civil disorder, heresy and war, would be put to flight, not just from Italy but from the whole world."

Kershaw notes that Hitler's devotees, too, expressed a "genuine belief in his power." He records the words of the former head of the Hitler Youth, Baldur von Schirach: "This unlimited, almost religious veneration, to which I contributed as did Goebbels, Göring, Hess, Ley, and countless others, strengthened in Hitler himself the belief that he was in league with Providence."

Both Mussolini and Hitler made vain and failed attempts at the same kind of universal human messiahship we have examined across millennia. At the human level it can never be. Next time, we look at the lessons we might learn from these thousands of years of failed messiahs.

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## PART 8

### Purging the People

*Lenin rejected the idea of god-building and atheism was his state's official belief system; but the use of traditional religion still played a part in securing popular support. Stalin encouraged this, using the deification of Lenin to his own advantage as he cast himself in the role of chosen successor.*



“Stalin is Jesus at the Last Supper, occupying the center point of the perspective to emphasize his omniscience. Behind his shoulder, a photograph of John the Baptist, in the incarnation of Lenin, hangs on the wall, looking down on the scene to bestow his blessing on his rightful heir. The anointed one is surrounded by his disciples, their heads bowed.”

This is author Deyan Sudjic's description (*The Edifice Complex*, 2005) of a painting on display in an otherwise rather empty Soviet shop window during the height of Joseph Stalin's rule. At first, the religious imagery seems strangely inappropriate for an atheistic state. Yet such was the cynical manipulation of religious sentiment in what in pure numbers was arguably one of the most murderous regimes in human history.

Hitler's name is synonymous with genocide. By many estimates he approved the systematic extermination of 11 million innocent men, women and children, more than half of them Jews, across Europe. But Stalin was responsible for the indiscriminate deaths of roughly twice as many Soviet citizens by deliberate famine, state-sponsored terror, and exile in forced labor camps (the Gulag). Some have felt that while Hitler and his henchmen displayed brutality in the extreme, Stalin and his bestial cohorts surpassed them.

Sickening as this calculus of evil is, it explains little. It compares psychopaths in leadership roles but says nothing of the social conditions under which such men acquire and maintain power. Further, it fails to explain why ordinary people shared in their senseless brutality. While Hitler and Stalin were deranged and profoundly evil, they were aided and abetted by masses of people who moved toward them as the leaders they desired. As we have noted before in this series, the symbiosis of leader and led cannot be ignored as we try to explain the bloodlust that characterizes the rule of many, if not all, false messiahs. Nor is exploitation of religious fervor ever far from the surface as leaders seek and maintain followers. Mussolini

appealed to elements of traditional Catholic religion to create his fascist cult, and Hitler was well aware of religion's power to induce loyalty to a cause. It was no different in the atheistic Soviet Union for most of the last century.

## **MAN OF STEEL**

Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili was born in Georgia in 1878 (later officially altered to 1879). He was the son of peasant stock, his father a semiliterate cobbler and his mother a washer woman. Only later did he adopt the name Stalin (Man of Steel), using it consistently from about 1913 onward.

Despite his humble origins, young Joseph gained an education sufficient to admit him at age 15 to the Tbilisi Theological Seminary. But training for the Orthodox priesthood did not match his growing political leanings toward Marxism. At age 20 he was either expelled or dropped out and became involved in anti-tsarist revolutionary activities, organizing demonstrations and strikes and robbing banks. By 1912 he was living in St. Petersburg and had taken up editorship of the communist doctrinal newspaper, *Pravda*. His arrest in 1913 culminated in exile in Northern Siberia, but early release came with the February Revolution of 1917.

Stalin returned to St. Petersburg, renamed Petrograd, and took up his role again as editor at *Pravda*. The aftermath of the October Revolution later that year put him in a stronger position to advance his political career. During the two-year civil war (1918–20), he came to the fore as an effective military administrator, and election to the role of general secretary of the Communist Party in 1922 provided him the opportunity to gain influence with the regular members.

By this time the party leader was ailing. But Vladimir Lenin had little confidence in the ambitious secretary. Still, despite his deathbed criticisms of Stalin's personality, Lenin was unable to prevent the accretion of his power.

Stalin had a very different view of Lenin. According to Georgian social-democratic leader Razhden Arsenidze, "he worshipped Lenin, he deified Lenin. He lived on Lenin's thoughts, copied him so closely that we jokingly called him 'Lenin's left leg.'"

How was it that, according to Russian biographer Edvard Radzinsky, the Soviet dictator "found his god" in Lenin? Who was this man to whom Stalin owed so much?

## **THE FATHER OF RUSSIAN COMMUNISM**

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov was born in 1870 in Simbirsk (renamed Ulyanovsk in his honor), almost 560 miles (about 900 km) east of Moscow on the River Volga. His brother's execution in 1887 for involvement in a plot to assassinate Tsar Alexander III encouraged Lenin's attachment to revolutionary causes. A practicing lawyer, he eventually took up full-time study and teaching of Karl Marx's theories, mostly to the worker class in St. Petersburg. The subversive nature of his activities put him on the run from the secret police, so he changed his name to Lenin to avoid arrest. Exiled to Siberia in 1895 for revolutionary activities, he left Russia for a further five years on his release in 1900. At a 1903 meeting in London, he became head of the new Bolshevik (Russian: "majority") faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party.

It was at about this time that Stalin became a follower of Lenin and a Bolshevik. Lenin spent little time in Russia until 1917, when, aided by the Germans, he returned from Switzerland via Germany and Sweden. The Germans hoped that his presence in Russia would destabilize their First World War enemy. By November of that year he had done just that, overthrowing the weak Kerensky government and installing the Soviet regime. As chairman



of the Council of People's Commissars, Lenin soon became a dictator. Stalin was one of three key council members who supported him. Soon the proletarian revolution was in full flood, with the nationalization of banks, an end to private ownership of land and its redistribution to the peasantry, workers' control over factory production, repression by secret police, and atheism as the state's official belief system.

Yet, as we have seen so often in this series, the use of traditional religion played a part in securing popular support. Following an attempt to assassinate Lenin in 1918, his public persona was infused with religious verbal and visual imagery. Sociologist Victoria Bonnell notes that now the leader "was characterized as having the qualities of a saint, an apostle, a prophet, a martyr, a man with Christ-like qualities, and a 'leader by the grace of God.'" Posters showed Lenin like a saint in Russian iconic art.

The next two difficult years saw civil war and war with Poland. By 1922, Lenin's labors had seriously affected his health. Two strokes that year were followed by a third in 1923, which cost him the ability to speak. His first stroke did not prevent and may even have hastened his criticism of Stalin's work as general secretary of the party and a recommendation for his removal.

An assessment of Lenin's political career need not detain us further here. It is what Stalin did with his idol's already existing personality cult that is significant for our purposes.

## **LENIN AS SAVIOR**

Aspects of the political, social and religious fabric of the Russian Motherland provided many of the necessary conditions for Lenin's cult. Historian Nina Tumarkin reminds us, "Just as the deification of Greek and Roman rulers was rooted in older conceptions of power and divinity and stimulated by current needs of state, so too later revolutionary cults were generated by political imperatives and were, at the same time, based on existing traditional forms and symbols."

In Russia's case, the religious pedigree includes direct descent from the Byzantine Orthodox Church of the Eastern Roman Empire. Following the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, some in Russia considered Moscow to be the "Third Rome" and inheritor of the mantle of Eastern Orthodoxy. Seeming to confirm the transfer of rights and responsibilities, the Grand Duke of Moscow, Ivan III (1462–1505), took as wife Sophia Paleologue, niece of the last Eastern Roman emperor, Constantine XI. Further, in 1547, in keeping with the Roman imperial model, the duke's grandson Ivan IV "the Terrible" became the first Russian leader to assume the title tsar/czar (derived from the Latin *caesar*). Here was a monarch who was considered secular, yet also a ruler by divine right. The idea that the tsar was God's representative on earth was soon commonly accepted among the peasantry and, as a result, easily transferable to the leader of the modern atheistic state.

The Orthodox Church's veneration of icons and "holy" relics provided a convenient precedent for the subsequent worship of Lenin's image and embalmed body. The purpose of this worship was, of course, that the Soviet peoples' emotional bond with the leader should extend to the party he represented. That the bodies of saints were incorruptible was a popular notion and one that suggested Lenin embalmed would be an invaluable state asset.

As with other examples in the history of personality cults, Lenin's elevation was evident well before his death. An important contribution came from Bolshevism itself. In its early years, the movement was anxious to replace traditional belief with a new humanistic religion—an effort known as "god-building." The Marxist faith was to center on the physical future of man. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the self-styled "poet of the revolution" and a god-builder, believed that

religion was central to all beneficial human activity. Better still if it was the religion of scientific socialism, which promised with biblical overtones “development of the human spirit into an ‘All-Spirit.’” Immortality might even be attained through the scientific defeat of death.

Lenin rejected the idea of god-building on the grounds that it was just another religion based on worshiping a deity (and he was passionately against gods of any kind). But ironically it was Lunacharsky and Leonid Krasin (another god-builder) who would later supervise the embalming of Lenin and the building of his mausoleum in Moscow’s Red Square. Before that, however, in the months leading up to Lenin’s death, Stalin seized the opportunity to personally advance his hero’s cult. Inviting leaders, soldiers and workers to Nizhny Novgorod (subsequently known as Gorky for many years) to visit, pay their last respects and make promises of continued loyalty to the dying man’s ideas, Stalin cunningly set himself up as stage manager of the developing cult. As Radzinsky puts it, Stalin “devised an unprecedented propaganda campaign which might have been called ‘Departure of the Messiah.’”

Stalin knew that Russia’s history proved her need for both a god and a tsar. Accordingly, Radzinsky explains, “he decided to present it with a new god, in the place of the one overthrown by the Bolsheviks. An atheist Messiah, the God Lenin.” And though Lenin’s widow Nadezhda Krupskaya opposed the deification on the grounds that Lenin himself would have objected, Stalin was determined to have his way, making sure that she was overruled by the Politburo.

### **DEIFYING THE DEAD**

Lenin’s funeral was a meticulously planned affair. His body arrived by train and was literally carried across Moscow to the Hall of Columns. At a memorial gathering the day before the funeral, Lenin’s widow spoke, as did various Bolshevik luminaries. Notable was Grigory Zinoviev’s address, which quoted letters from two workers. One looked to Lenin as “our dear father . . . our unforgettable father—the father of the whole world,” the other to the great leader who could not deceive the people: “It was impossible not to believe in Lenin.” It ended with the plea: “Lenin, live! It is only you who understand us, no one else.” According to Tumarkin, Zinoviev was showing Lenin to be “a prophet, and a savior.” Stalin’s speech was unremarkable except that he attempted to speak for everyone when he declared, “We swear to you, comrade Lenin, that we will not spare our lives in order to strengthen the union of the working people of the entire world—the communist international!” After Stalin’s eulogy came that of Nikolai Bukharin. He spoke of Lenin as the great helmsman who had saved the ship of state. It was a salvific image that would later become popular in Chinese communism.

After the memorial, Stalin stood vigil through the night as mourners filed past Lenin’s temporarily embalmed body. Requests that the funeral be postponed and even that the body not be buried at all may have meshed in Stalin’s mind with an earlier idea he had considered for establishing Lenin’s continuing presence. In any case, when the body began showing signs of decay about a month later, scientists were called upon to perform what seemed impossible at the time: embalming the body in such a way that it could go on permanent display. So successful were they that Lenin the atheist became a “holy” relic, visible to this day.

But the cult was not limited to the mausoleum by the Kremlin’s wall. Tumarkin notes, “Stylized portraits and busts of Lenin were [the cult’s] icons, his idealized biography its gospel, and Leninism its sacred writings. Lenin Corners [or “Red corners”] were local shrines for the veneration of the leader.” These took the place of the traditional icon corner in the Russian Orthodox home. In other words, the leader was immortalized. According to the All-Russian Soviet of Trade Unions, “healthy or sick, living or dead . . . Lenin remains our eternal leader.” This state of affairs led to a pilgrim industry, as thousands flocked to see the relic. It

was as Stalin had planned it, but there was much more to come. Radzinsky observes, “Stalin had delivered their imperishable God. Next he must give them a tsar.”

The beginning of that transformation came at the Thirteenth Party Congress in May 1924, when Lenin’s widow provided the Central Committee with his Last Testament. The members studied it and dismissed its criticisms of General Secretary Stalin. They simply decided that Lenin’s mind was disturbed following his first stroke. This was not enough for Stalin. Knowing that his fellow committee members would oppose each other in a leadership contest, he cleverly offered to resign; after all, that was what his idol had wished. As he anticipated, because of his comrades’ bitter rivalry, he was reconfirmed. This set the scene for his rise to almost total power during the rest of the decade.

### **FIGHTING RELIGION AND BECOMING A GOD**

The destruction of traditional religion was part and parcel of communist philosophy. Marx’s epithet, “religion is the opium of the people,” was soon promoted across the union. Priests were hounded, monasteries closed. Following Lenin’s lead, Stalin began encouraging the collective demolition of churches. What he planned in place of Moscow’s largest edifice, the Church of Christ the Savior, was instructive. It would become the Palace of the Soviets, complete with a huge statue of the new messiah, Lenin. Children were encouraged to bring traditional religious icons from home and burn them in bonfires. They were sent home with replacement posters of the beloved former leader.

None of this, of course, prevented Stalin’s use of religious imagery. He was, after all, a former seminarian.

His religious roots showed themselves in various ways. In December 1929, Stalin celebrated his self-invented 50th birthday and combined it with the commemoration of Lenin’s death. His speech of thanks, directed “to all the organizations and comrades who have congratulated me,” mimicked humility and biblical language: “I regard your greetings as addressed to the great Party of the working class which bore me and reared me in its own image and likeness.” Here were echoes of Genesis 1, with the Party as the Creator’s replacement.

And that was not all. Like the gods of old, Stalin’s origins were other-worldly. He was not conceived and born of a woman but of the abstract Party. From a psychological perspective, perhaps this was to be expected. Though he wrote regularly to his mother, he visited her only twice in the 1920s and once in the ’30s. When she died, he simply sent a wreath. At their last meeting in 1935, he asked her why she had beaten him so much as a child. She told him that’s why he had turned out so well. Then she asked him, “Joseph, what exactly are you now?” He replied, “Do you remember the tsar? Well, I’m something like the tsar.” She responded, “You’d have done better to have become a priest.” Radzinsky notes that *Pravda* reported the meeting in terms of the Great Mother and the Great Leader, with imagery reminiscent of the Virgin Mary.

Stalin adopted the title “Leader”—in Russian, *vozhd*—in the late 1920s. It was soon applied to him uniquely, as a “leader and teacher” in the tradition of Lenin. Like other Leaders of his time, Mussolini the Duce and Hitler the Führer, he dispensed with rule by so-called democratic means once it became a possibility. Though he had begun as part of a triumvirate, by the end of his first four years in power, “the Boss” truly was well on his way to becoming a communist tsar, having eliminated all the early comrades of Lenin. And with his immediate challengers out of the way, he had gained sufficient ground to prepare for the mantle of godhood. Now he could take his place among a very different triumvirate. As Radzinsky explains, “a Bolshevik Trinity, a triune godhead, was emerging. Marx, Lenin and himself. Gods of the earth.”

Stalin seemed somewhat reluctant about his own personality cult, though he was happy enough to accept the benefits once they became evident. Analyzing Stalin's superficial modesty, biographer Robert Service wonders if it was a lesson learned from a Roman source. "Did his interest in the career of Augustus, first of the Roman emperors, influence him? Augustus would never accept the title of king despite obviously having become the founder of a dynastic monarchy."

Stalin's change from promoter of Lenin as divine to the promoter of self was subtle. First he became the main interpreter of Lenin's thought. Then he was his coequal, appearing side by side with him in posters. By the mid 1930s, Vladimir Ilyich had faded into the background of such renderings. Eventually he appeared only as a name on the cover of a book in Stalin's hand, and the new party slogan declared, "Stalin is the Lenin of today." Iconic images of Stalin as a Christlike figure followed. One poet wrote in 1936, "But Thou, O Stalin, are more high / Than the highest places of the heavens." A letter written to the lower-ranking state president said, "You are for me like a man-god, and I.V. Stalin is god." At the 1939 All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, where the Stalin cult dominated, there was even a 100-foot (30-meter) concrete statue towering over the crowds.

It is important to note once again that this evolution was not the work of Stalin alone. As in all modern dictatorships, the Leader was supported and promoted by the led. In his comparative study of Hitler and Stalin, historian Richard Overy observes, "There is an act of complicity between the ruler who projects the image of mythic hero and the followers who sanctify and substantiate it. The emotional bond created by the act binds both parties." And of course, the support is not just for the Leader personally but for all that he does. As Service writes, "the Great Terror [1937–38] required stenographers, guards, executioners, cleaners, torturers, clerks, railwaymen, truck drivers and informers." Thus, many ordinary people formerly skeptical of Stalin came into line. Recent scholarly examination of personal diaries from the period demonstrates the lengths to which people went to harmonize their critical views with state policy. In search of personal meaning within the awful flow of their country's recent history, they explained away what their minds were telling them was wrong. Cultural historian Jochen Hellbeck shows that under such conditions, people will rationalize terror, cruelty, deprivation, false imprisonment and purges of family and friends to feel at one with the system. People want to have lives with meaning, and the communist project seemed to provide that: humanity was on its way to socialist perfection; the "new man" was being formed.

## **POWER, PEOPLES AND PURGES**

Once Stalin had achieved sufficient power, he set about effecting "the Great Change." Convinced of the Leninist dictum that terror is an essential instrument for legitimizing the state, and with the murderous tsar Ivan the Terrible as his model, he launched an attack on those farmers and their families (the kulak) who had profited under the New Economic Policy (1921–28).

In 1929, Stalin made his intentions plain when he wrote about "the liquidation of the kulak as a class." Starting that year, they were shipped out to remote frozen wilderness areas by cattle car and left to fend for themselves. Their removal, together with Stalin's collectivization of agriculture and acceleration of industrialization, left the countryside desperately short of food. This led to horrific examples of cannibalism and the death by famine of an estimated 5–8 million people. Yet Stalin dismissed talk of famine as "counter-revolutionary agitation." In the cities there was hatred of the starving kulaks who appeared on the outskirts like desperate foraging animals.

At the same time, Stalin began political purges with the supposed aim of protecting the Soviet experiment from Western imperialist “wreckers.” He took the opportunity to stage show trials of intellectuals, academics, scientists, economists, as well as political opponents. When his lieutenant S.M. Kirov was murdered in 1934, Stalin even purged many of the “Old Bolsheviks,” men with whom he had worked and governed.

In early 1937, the Great Terror took hold. The Politburo sent out the order to local authorities to exterminate “the most hostile anti-Soviet elements.” According to British historian Simon Sebag Montefiore, this amounted to “democide,” ordering the death of entire classes of people by “industrial quotas.” He notes, “This final solution was a slaughter that made sense in terms of the faith and idealism of Bolshevism which was religion based on the systematic destruction of classes.”

The operation was so successful that the local authorities, with their three-man tribunals, asked for higher quotas and got them. In all about 760,000 were arrested and almost 400,000 executed. These indiscriminate arrests and killings were augmented by the national and ethnic murder, arrest or deportation of large numbers of Poles and Germans, as well as Bulgarians, Macedonians, Koreans, Kurds, Greeks, Finns, Estonians, Iranians, Latvians, Chinese and Romanians, bringing the total arrests to 1.5 million and the death toll to 700,000.

Stalin, the mastermind behind all of this appalling death and destruction, disappeared from public view while the killings were going on. At the same time, he took the chance to rid himself of many people closest to him. Montefiore notes: “Within a year and a half, 5 of the 15 Politburo members, 98 of the 139 Central Committee members and 1,108 of the 1,966 delegates from the Seventeenth Congress had been arrested.” Wives of the condemned were imprisoned and separated from their families. Almost one million children were thus deprived not only of their fathers but also of their mothers, many for up to 20 years. Even the secret police and army were not immune, with one chief after another suffering the same fate: beaten into confession for treasons they never committed, and shot on the Boss’s orders. Anyone suspected of potential disloyalty to the state in the event of world war became a target.

When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin was stunned, but he quickly recovered and took matters in hand. His subsequent wartime leadership meant a massive increase in suffering and numbers of dead, though the internal terror abated. Despite Allied victory over Germany, more than 20 million died in the USSR, of which about 7 million were civilians. Stalin’s willingness to sacrifice his people had not changed. Nevertheless, he was voted Marshal of the Soviet Union (1943) and Generalissimus (1945).

Despite the carnage in his wake, his elevation continued. In the conclusion to a 1949 Soviet film, *The Fall of Berlin*, Stalin arrives in the ruined city by air. Wearing a shining white uniform, the messiah is welcomed by the happy people of the world. They sing, “We follow you to wondrous times, / We tread the path of victory. . . .” Yet soon his paranoia about the West, and about imperialist enemies within, returned. There were more purges and the persecution of those closest to him.

Stalin’s death in March 1953, following a cerebral hemorrhage, made him even more the subject of adulation. Thousands streamed past his body, lying in state in the Hall of Columns. Embalmed in the manner of Lenin, he was laid to rest at his former idol’s side in the Red Square mausoleum. Only in 1961, five years after Nikita Khrushchev’s public repudiation of Stalin’s cult, was the disgraced leader removed and buried near the Kremlin wall. He had promoted Lenin’s cult in an effort to advance his own apotheosis, and for a bloody three decades he had succeeded. But in the end he was brought down to the ground quite literally. And Stalinism was buried with him.

As for the man whose crucial testament Stalin had suppressed, he is still on display—a moribund reminder of his own false messianic system. Overwhelming malice and brutality meant that neither Lenin nor Stalin could ever deliver anything approaching utopia. Next time, the 20th-century false messiahs of the Orient.

DAVID HULME

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“It is an irony of history that the god-builders acted to deify human genius in the person of Lenin, for whom all religion was anathema. . . .”

-Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*

“As [Stalin] became tsar he resolved also to become a god.”

-Edvard Radzinsky, *Stalin*

“Look: in the fog like a beacon  
There stands, firm and unchanged,  
The ever living Predsovnarkom,  
The guide of the world—Lenin.”

-Anatoly Lunacharsky, “Painting” (1925),  
Quoted by Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*

“We ask that a book be published, fully comprehensible to peasants, about the life and work of dear Com. Lenin and his legacy, so that this book could be our replacement for the Gospel.”

-Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!* (Quoting a Letter Written by a Peasant after Lenin's Death)

“Lenin was reborn in almost Christ-like terms; martyrdom, resurrection and immortality were the themes of the Lenin cult, ‘Lenin lives!’ its watchword.”

-Richard Overy, *The Dictators*

“Christianity had to give way to communism and Lenin was to be presented to society as the new Jesus Christ.”

-Robert Service, *Stalin*

“The ideas of Stalin as saviour, as the source of a supernatural power, as prophet or redeemer, were borrowed from traditions in Russian popular religion with which most ordinary Russians were still familiar, even if they were hostile to them.”

-Richard Overy, *The Dictators*

## PART 9

### Oriental Christs



Image Courtesy of the IISH [Stefan R. Landsberger Collection](#)

God-men, inspired by the Roman Empire's style of government and linked with traditional Christianity, have come and gone in Europe for almost two millennia. In the last issue of *Vision* we looked at a Eurasian manifestation of the ruler cult as it played out in the history of the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin. Manipulation of religious sentiment is an important element in the rise and rule of false messiahs, and even atheistic states have succumbed to the temptation to call on the power of piety.

With the spread of totalitarianism and communism in the 20th century, it should not surprise us to find examples of messianic political aspirations in modern oriental Asia, nor to find indigenous antecedents in its ruler cults. China's Mao Zedong, Cambodia's Pol Pot, and the Kim dynasty of North Korea have all claimed savior status. And they have all called on historical precedent and religious sentiment for legitimacy.

The rise of Chinese communism dominates recent Asian history. Though the mindless brutality of the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin shocked the world to the core, exceeding even that of Adolf Hitler, Mao's violent rule remains unsurpassed in modern history.

Before we examine the appalling details, it's helpful to take note of Mao's 19th-century precursor, a man with his own extraordinary pretensions.

#### **MAO'S MESSIANIC FORERUNNER**

About 50 years before Mao's birth in 1893, China suffered the depredations of a different kind of god-man under the self-proclaimed "Heavenly King," Hong Xiuquan. Hong was of the Hakka people from southern China's Guangdong province, adjacent to Mao's birth province of Hunan. Mao had a favorable impression of Hong's messianic regime and took it as an inspiration, using it to legitimate his own. It would prove to be a fateful comparison.

Hong claimed to have had a mystical experience in 1837, a dream in which he said an old man with a golden beard and a black dragon cloak told him to rid the world of evil, and especially of its idols. In the vision, he received a sword and a seal and the help of another

middle-aged man. Though he did not immediately claim to understand the dream's meaning, one of his literary works that year, "The Poem on Executing the Vicious and Preserving the Righteous," presaged the violence that would soon be associated with his quasi-Christian utopian kingdom.

In 1843, Hong suffered a depression following repeated failure in his attempts to pass the all-important civil service examination—a key to status and prosperity in imperial China. In his distressed mental state, he read a book that had been on his shelf for several years, the gift of a friend. *Good Words for Exhorting the Age* was a collection of nine tracts by the first Chinese Protestant evangelist, Liang Fa, aimed at explaining Christianity to his people.

As a result of Liang's abbreviated version of the Bible's essential message, Hong came to believe that the mysterious golden-bearded elderly man in his vision was none other than God the Father. The middle-aged man was Jesus Christ, and he, Hong Xiuquan, was Jesus' younger brother. He thus convinced himself that he was the new messiah sent to save China. Baptizing himself, Hong believed that he had now become a Christian.

In another indication of the kind of rule he would introduce, he immediately ordered the forging of two giant weapons, named "demon-killer swords," symbolic of his desire to rid the land of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.

As a teacher, Hong was able to convert some of his fellow workers to his beliefs, and they began to remove the traditional Chinese wooden tablets honoring Confucius from their schools. Public reaction was so severe, however, that Hong fled on foot, walking 300 miles to the western province of Guangxi. There a companion founded a sect, the "God-Worshippers Society," of which Hong became leader in 1847.

Hong's published series, *Ode on the Origin of the Way and Our Salvation* (1845–48), no doubt incorporated in part his severe interpretation of the teaching of an American Baptist missionary, Issachar Jacox Roberts. They studied together for a few months in 1847. In all of this Hong was readying himself to announce his stern, theocratic "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" (Taiping).

Nothing significant happened, however, until the Chinese government attempted to quash the God Worshippers by force in 1850. It was then that the Taiping Rebellion broke out and Hong and his armed followers moved steadily northward, taking control of an estimated 600 cities. As they did, they were joined by tens of thousands of disaffected peasants who objected to British colonialism and its support by the weak Qing (Manchu) dynasty in Beijing. Hong's proposed reforms—he was against opium smoking, gambling and prostitution—resonated with the local people. In March 1853, with an army now numbering close to one million, Hong captured Nanjing, renaming it "Heavenly Capital" (Tianjing).

But heaven it was not. Infighting and an aversion to the work of governing on the part of the Heavenly King took its toll. Hong murdered two of his generals and began to spend more time in religious contemplation or in his harem. Within a decade, the Taiping capital was under such great stress that Hong's generals advised retreat. He refused, saying that God would provide, even if Tianjing were besieged. But in June 1864, with his own health in decline, Hong committed suicide at the age of 50.

Just short of seven weeks later, Qing troops, accompanied by Western military advisors, took the city and slaughtered an estimated 100,000 Taiping adherents. But that shocking number was merely a token of the 20 million people who had died from war or starvation during the reign of Hong Xiuquan—the man much admired by Mao Zedong.



Perhaps this admiration is the reason why a decade into Mao's rule in 1959, the People's Republic of China (PRC) opened a museum in Hong's original home, renovating it two years later. In 1988, 12 years after Mao's death, the Chinese government recognized Hong's *Origin of the Way* series as "Protected National Significant Documents." For the 140th anniversary of the uprising that established the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace, the PRC inaugurated the Hong Xiuquan Memorial Museum in Guangzhou, where according to local publicity, the associated "sites and relics are sure to inspire the patriot in you."

### **THE CHAIRMAN'S EARLY LIFE**

Mao was born into a fairly wealthy peasant family in the remote Hunan village of Shaoshan. His father, with whom he developed an antagonistic relationship, was hard-working, while his mother was tolerant and doting. Mao's early Buddhist attachment, fostered by his mother, would eventually give way to interest in Marxism-Leninism. In 1911 he enlisted in the revolutionary army fighting against the Qing dynasty in his local region. This brief military experience as a teenager confirmed his admiration for his childhood heroes: Chinese emperor-warriors, the revolutionary George Washington, and the aspiring neo-Roman emperor Napoleon (see *Messiahs! Part 6*). With the overthrow of the Qing rulers and the birth of the Chinese republic, Mao returned to school, where he became involved with student groups. One of them, the New People's Study Society, founded in the winter of 1917–18, produced many communist party members in the years that followed.

After graduation, Mao relocated to Beijing, walking much of the way. There he began work as a librarian's assistant. His stay coincided with an outburst of Chinese anti-imperialism in response to the unfavorable terms of the post-World War I Treaty of Versailles: German concessions in Shandong, birthplace of Confucius, were to be given to Japan rather than returned to China. The creation of the cultural and political May Fourth Movement of 1919 was one spontaneous response. China refused to sign the treaty and would eventually make a separate agreement with Germany.

In 1920, Mao became principal of a school in Changsha and organized a Communist Youth League branch there. The upheaval caused by the May Fourth Movement soon led to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Mao had already come under the influence of the two men who began the party—his mentor Li Dazhao (Beijing University's chief librarian, history professor, and supporter of the Bolshevik revolution) and the anarchist intellectual Chen Duxiu (organizer of the May Fourth Movement). Mao attended the first session of the national congress in July 1921 and was elected as one of the commissars of the Central Committee in 1923.

In 1924–25 he spent time at home in Shaoshan. There he witnessed the peasants' potential for revolutionary activity when they demonstrated against foreign police suppression of Chinese people in Shanghai. Li's views on Marxism-Leninism had already formed the center of Mao's thinking. Li believed that the Chinese peasantry replaced the urban proletariat of Marxist theory. By the time of his mentor's death by execution in 1927, it had become clear to Mao that there were far too few among China's urban working class to make a difference in any uprising. To make matters worse, the Chinese Nationalist Party under Chiang Kai-shek, with which Mao had worked in partnership for a time, had recently carried out an anticommunist coup and destroyed the urban centers of the party. Mao now recognized that China could not wait any longer for revolution to spread from the industrialized Western world and that the peasantry would have to be mobilized to defeat the forces of Chinese imperialism.

### **GETTING BEHIND A FOUNDING MYTH**

In 1930 Mao began a year-long purge of his fellow communists in the provinces of Jiangxi and Fujian (estimates of those killed range from 20,000 to 186,000). According to Jung Chang and Jon Halliday in *Mao: The Unknown Story*, “this critical episode—in many ways the formative moment of Maoism—is still covered up to this day. Mao’s personal responsibility and motives, and his extreme brutality, remain taboo.”

Mao emerged as leader of the newly declared Chinese Soviet Republic in late 1931, with the Soviet Union recognizing his leadership and appointing him chairman, president and prime minister.

By 1934 the Chinese Red Army had fought and won four campaigns against Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist forces. But in October they were unable to withstand a fifth campaign, and so began the one-year, 6,000-mile (10,000-km) retreat known as the Long March. By this time Mao had been pushed aside as chairman—a reaction by his colleagues to his first great purge. Though he did not regain a leadership role in the party until several more months had passed, the mythology of the Long March has made him the Chinese Moses leading his people to freedom. Certainly no one can fairly record the history of modern China without recognizing the trials and tribulations of the 80,000 involved in the journey. Completed by fewer than 4,000, according to Chang and Halliday, the march remains the founding myth of communist China. Along the way, the marchers politicized the peasantry, terrorizing “landlords” and turning their holdings over to the peasants.

Documentary-maker Sun Shuyun details the memories of surviving pioneers of the arduous journey in her 2006 book. But she also allows her interviewees and her on-location research to overturn some of the associated mythology and to further reveal Mao’s capacity for extreme brutality, well before the infamous Great Leap Forward (1958–60) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) took their toll. In the latter, Mao even murdered most of the remaining Long March veterans.

## **THE CULT OF PERSONALITY**

At the end of the march in the fall of 1935, the remnants of the Red Armies set themselves up in Yen’an in northwestern China’s Shaanxi province. It was here that Mao was able to consolidate his power, covertly cooperating with the Japanese during their invasion of China.

Between 1936 and 1944 he had time to create his own Chinese version of Marxism-Leninism, writing several theoretical works. This alienated him somewhat from his Soviet financial supporter Joseph Stalin (the supplier, beginning in 1940 and annually for a few years, of \$45–50 million, at today’s value). Stalin did not believe that the Chinese communists could achieve a proletarian revolutionary state without the partnership of Chiang Kai-shek. The change in the war’s balance against the Germans and Japanese in 1945 was to prove the Soviet dictator wrong.

During the same period, terror and torture campaigns against his own communist supporters remained one of Mao’s primary methods of maintaining power. His deputy and terror organizer, Kang Sheng, had participated in Stalin’s purges in the Soviet Union. Mao continued to violently coerce his own supporters until it was apparent that the Japanese would be defeated in World War II and the Red Army would have to face the nationalists for control of China. At that point, hypocritically, he began to apologize for the suffering he had caused. He now needed the young cadres and the experienced military leaders to fight the nationalist enemy.

Meanwhile, Mao put in place the personality cult for which he became infamous. The terror campaign made it easy for him to rule out criticism of his leadership once and for all. According to Chang and Halliday, some recalled it as the period when it was “firmly

established in our minds that Chairman Mao is our only wise leader.” His deification was thus rooted in terror and a construction of his own making. The *Liberation Daily* announced in headlines, “Comrade Mao Tse-tung is the Saviour of the Chinese People!” Badges with Mao’s image appeared on people’s clothing, his portrait in their homes. In early 1945, at the Seventh Party Congress stacked with his own loyalists and terrorized “supporters,” he had himself recognized as the supreme leader of the CCP. He was now China’s Stalin.

### **ABSOLUTE POWER**

The four years that followed saw the country thrust into civil war, during which unspeakable acts of violence, brutality, torture, starvation and murder were perpetrated and encouraged by China’s communists. Peasants were taught to turn on any of their neighbors who were slightly better off or who had offended them, often in some minor way. Terror was never far from the surface in Mao’s world.

In 1949, with much support from the Soviets and closet communists among the nationalists, the Red Army defeated Chiang Kai-shek, who took refuge on the island of Taiwan (Formosa). Stalin’s refusal to help Mao take Taiwan for fear of American opposition gave the nationalists a permanent home. But in October, Mao, now the absolute ruler of 550 million, stood on top of Beijing’s Tiananmen Gate to declare the People’s Republic of China. Appearing there became his practice on special occasions. It was an idea copied from Soviet leaders’ use of Lenin’s tomb as a platform. According to historian Emilio Gentile, on such occasions Mao “offered his person for adoration by the masses as a modern reincarnation of the ancient Chinese emperor venerated as the Son of the Heavens, by appearing at the top of the Gate of Heavenly Peace before the immense Tienanmen [sic] Square filled with a great sea of people.” Adulation of Mao increased markedly. Again Gentile remarks, “After 1949, his glorification continued apace as he was attributed with mythical and messianic qualities—‘Mao-sun,’ ‘Mao is the star of salvation,’ ‘Mao is China’s helmsman.’”

The new government was soon actively pursuing a further terror campaign—this time a year of mass executions of “spies,” “landlords,” and “counterrevolutionaries.” Claiming that “only when this thing is properly done can our power be secure,” the Chairman ordered “massive arrests, massive killings.” About three million died during this time, many of them in full public view. For millions of others whose value as forced laborers was greater than the value of their immediate death, prison or labor camp was the answer. However, as many as 27 million may have died as a result of being worked too hard or of being driven to suicide during Mao’s rule. Millions of others were put under surveillance yet remained “free.” But because they could be rounded up at any time for any reason, they lived in constant fear on society’s margins.

### **LEAPING FORWARD, GOING BACKWARD**

Mao’s attempt to gain superpower status for the PRC by increasing agricultural productivity and pursuing industrialization led to the second Five-Year Plan known as the Great Leap Forward. It was a disaster. Between 1958 and 1960, Mao required China’s agricultural sector to produce as much as possible so that it could be exported to the Soviet Union in exchange for industrial help. False claims were made about the country’s improving productive capacity, and critically needed staples were exported. By 1961, forced collectivization, bad weather, poor harvests and a shortage of labor—caused by drawing people away into rudimentary industrial production—had brought about the death of almost 38 million Chinese from starvation and overwork. Mao refused to accept that his policies had resulted in the worst famine in Chinese if not world history and blamed those party officials who criticized his ideas. Having lost the state chairmanship in 1959, and anticipating the blame he would receive for the disaster, he set about strengthening his personality cult and creating the means of his return.

Gentile observes, “As Mao recovered power, there was a parallel increase in the glorification of his thought as an absolute truth and the sanctification of his person as a living demigod.” He quotes Italian journalist Virgilio Lilli, who visited China in 1960 and wrote, “For the Chinese masses, Mao Tse-Tung is a saint who already has something of the divine about him.”

This development coincided with Mao’s establishing of the student-based Red Guards and the party officials and workers known as the Rebels or Radicals. Together they would wreak havoc on China for a decade.

## **A REVOLUTION ANYTHING BUT CULTURAL**

By 1966, Mao was ready to mobilize his manipulated student soldiers and the radical party officials. Working in the schools, the Red Guards launched the Cultural Revolution, trumpeting the thoughts of the Chairman from his widely distributed *Little Red Book* (a billion copies of which were printed). They were supported by military commander Lin Biao and the People’s Liberation Army. Purist in thought, the Red Guards hewed to Mao’s radical version of Marxism-Leninism. Their purge was directed at the Chairman’s enemies—from the top echelons of government to intellectuals, writers, poets, artists and, of course, the obligatory landlords. The Rebels, on the other hand, took action in the factories and administrative structures in the urban areas.

Chinese sociologist Jiping Zuo noted that in 1966 “the streets of Beijing were filled with banners with such slogans as ‘Long live Chairman Mao’ and ‘Be ready to die in defense of Chairman Mao.’ The songs children sang were reminiscent of Western hymns in praise of Jesus. . . . Mao was glorified as ‘the Red Sun,’ ‘the Great Teacher,’ ‘the Great Leader,’ ‘the Great Commander,’ ‘the Great Steersman,’ and significantly ‘the Messiah of the Working People.’”

The man who had taken Mao’s position as chairman of the PRC, his Long March colleague Liu Shao Qi, found himself surrounded by 30,000 Red Guards, who dragged him from his presidential palace into the street. There they humiliated and beat him, breaking his back. Sent to a detention camp, he died in isolation—all at the instigation of Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing.

During the decade-long cultural chaos, religious institutions were attacked, Buddhist monks and Catholic priests and nuns sent to the countryside for “reeducation.” Religion was once more declared “the opium of the people.” But faith of a different kind was encouraged. It was said that Mao could cure illness if a sick person would only read his book. As Singaporean diplomat Lee Khoo Choy has written of the period, “Mao had taken away the function of God. Mao had become God.”

## **WORLD RULER**

Mao made an extensive study of history and biography. He examined 300 case studies in Chinese history and 30 in world history. A hundred biographies of Chinese and world personalities consumed his attention. He analyzed the rule of many Chinese emperors and especially appreciated those who achieved success through cruelty and oppression.

Consistent with his overweening domestic ambitions was his desire to become ruler of the world. He could not stop at the role of supreme leader of China or even at surpassing Stalin as the most advanced exponent of Marxism-Leninism. He was out to take over the planet. In 1968 he told an Australian Maoist, “In my opinion, the world needs to be unified. . . . In the past, many, including the Mongols, the Romans . . . Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and the British Empire, wanted to unify the world. Today, both the United States and the Soviet Union

want to unify the world. Hitler wanted to unify the world. . . . But they all failed. It seems to me that the possibility of unifying the world has not disappeared. . . . In my view, the world can be unified.”

But it was not to be. In September 1976, Mao succumbed to weakness brought on by a massive heart attack in June. The Great Helmsman was no more, or so it seemed. His body was soon embalmed in the great Soviet tradition and lies in a vast mausoleum open to the adoring public in Tiananmen Square.

In Mao’s birthplace of Shaoshan, a cottage industry in memorabilia has sprung up. The unparalleled death and destruction he brought has not diminished his appeal. According to Ian Buruma, writing in the *Guardian* in 2001, “Humans have been worshipped as gods for thousands of years in China, and the point of Mao, in the eyes of the believers, is no longer whether he was good or bad; such categories do not apply to godmen.”

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#### North Korea’s Kim Dynasty

If Pol Pot (1925–98) proved to be Cambodia’s ephemeral false messiah, there is nothing short-term about the legacy of Kim Il-sung (1912–94) of North Korea. He began his 46-year rule as a committed Marxist-Leninist but eventually created his own postcommunist Juche ideology of self-reliance. In the process, he perpetuated a personality cult and a savior dynasty.

Depicted in one propagandist legend walking across a river on nothing more substantial than fallen leaves, Kim Il-sung, according to one defector, “was the object of a personality cult extravagant enough to rival that of Stalin or Mao Tse-tung, and indeed, even to outlive them.”

Like other 20th-century communist leaders, Kim considered not only capitalism but Christianity to be corrupting and deadly to the state. He repudiated Christian nonviolence, believing that revolutionaries needed to cultivate a fighter’s mentality rather than what he considered to be the weak-mindedness of psalm-singers.

In denouncing the religion, however, the atheist apparently did not mind borrowing heavily from Christianity’s imagery. More than a decade after his death, his cult, centered on the Trinitarian belief of his Pentecostal Christian mother, is flourishing. Kim Il-sung has become the everlasting father; his son, Kim Jong-il (whose birth was allegedly attested by signs and wonders) is the Jesus figure; and the state’s emphasis on self-reliance counterfeits the Holy Spirit.

Besides immortalizing Kim Il-sung (the People’s Supreme Assembly named him president “for all eternity” four years after his death), Juche teaches in a parallel with Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John that Kim Jong-il has been sent to do the will of his father, and that the two are one in ideology and will. The state religion also compels party activists to emulate the traits of the “mother party,” a phrase that begs comparison with the New Testament’s “mother church.” Further, Juche maintains that the people of North Korea live in an earthly paradise, a concept borrowed from the returning

Christ's 1,000-year kingdom of peace (see Revelation 20). But this would have to be an article of faith in a country that is often on the brink of starvation through bad economic policy.

In the 1990s North Korea suffered a devastating famine on a par with Ethiopia's a decade earlier. Though Kim Jong-il officially blamed national disasters for the food shortages, defectors say that widespread mismanagement was the primary cause. In addition, the Juche doctrine of national isolation and self-sufficiency is cited by critics as the reason international aid was not sought until conditions became dire. As a result, an estimated 2 million people lost their lives before the situation temporarily stabilized.

Despite such self-imposed difficulties, North Koreans were encouraged to refer to Kim Il-sung as "Our Fatherly Leader," "Our Great Leader" or, difficult as it is to believe, "Light of Human Genius, the Unequaled Genius, the Summit of Thought, the North Star of the People." Because he was accorded "eternal presidency," his son, Kim Jong-il, has not taken on the presidential title but has added "Great Successor" to the other hyperbolic descriptors by which he is addressed.

Whether greatness is a term to be used of the successor is something that defectors would argue. They say Kim Jong-il has continued his father's system of control, using the threat of hard labor and concentration camps. Deviations from the established tenets of Juche can still be as life-threatening as they were under Kim Il-sung, despite the initial reluctance of most nations to believe such things can happen in the 21st century.

DH

#### **Pol Pot: Cambodia's Curse**

When Mao received his protégé, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, in Beijing in June 1975, it was to congratulate him on installing radical communism in one fell swoop. "You have scored a splendid victory. Just a single blow and no more classes," enthused the Chairman. Though Mao realized that the Cambodian experiment might well prove naïve, he did nothing to stop the brutality that quickly descended on the "liberated" and did everything to provide military and other aid to the new communist regime on the block.

Unlike Pol Pot's, China's revolution had failed to make everyone a slave overnight. But Mao's congratulations would prove premature. New classes would soon emerge, and the catastrophic effects of Khmer Rouge policies on state and people were yet to hit with full force.

Pol Pot and his colleagues had emptied various captured towns during their rise to power beginning in 1967, driving the people into the countryside. In this they followed the Maoist line that the peasantry would have to replace the urban proletariat of Marx's vision if the communist revolution was to succeed in largely rural Cambodia. The difference when it came to emptying the capital, Phnom Penh, was the sheer size of the evacuation. No one was exempt from the order: even those in hospitals were required to leave. In the days following the city's capture, more than 2.5 million men, women and children were forced to walk for miles into the countryside. In the three days it took to travel the first eight miles, 20,000 died. The poor and uneducated were allowed to build bamboo huts and begin farming. Others who survived the journey were put to work on collective farms or on forced labor projects.

People were separated into three classes: those who enjoyed full rights (mostly poor peasants); candidates for full-rights status; and "depositees," mostly urban newcomers to the agrarian communes, who were given no political rights and who were often singled out for death. Government officials, intellectuals, teachers, even people who simply wore glasses were purged, tortured, forced to dig their own graves, and murdered. Meticulous accounts of their imprisonment and death were recorded and photographs taken. Khmer Rouge officials made it known that only one or two million people were needed for the revolution to succeed. The rest of the population was dispensable. In four years, an estimated 1.7 million died from starvation, sickness, overwork, or execution by bludgeoning

(bullets were not to be wasted). Pol Pot's anticulture regime used its "killing fields" to dispose of more of its own nationality than any other in human history—fully 25 percent of the population.

Pol Pot and his inner circle seem to have finalized the decision to turn Cambodia into a no-compromise, fully communist state at a meeting of about 20 Khmer Rouge leaders in May 1975, a few weeks after the fall of Phnom Penh. Not only would cities be evacuated and land redistributed, but money, the symbol of capitalism, would be abolished. Eventually, after the people had been "purified," a modern technological society would emerge.

The leaders met for a couple of weeks inside the capital's Royal Palace, at its most revered Buddhist shrine, the Silver Pagoda. But Pol Pot was no longer satisfied to be their equal and signaled his new status in an unusual way. While everyone else slept in the open on cots, Pol's aides placed his bed on a raised platform in the center of the sanctuary, where statues of the Buddha normally stood.

His acceptance of this literal and figurative elevation was hardly the act of a man without some form of divine pretension. In fact, the path he constructed for the Cambodian people bore an uncanny resemblance to the path to enlightenment he was taught to revere in his formative years. As a child, Saloth Sâr, as he was then known, spent a period of time in a strict Buddhist monastery where beatings enforced rigid rules of detachment and the renouncement of individuality and materialism. These shortcuts to enlightenment eerily foreshadowed the adult Pol's shortcut to radical communism.

In 1977 he flirted with expanding his influence by way of establishing a personality cult. Though his idea never came to fruition, Pol went so far as to order his portrait painted and a variety of busts sculpted. A 25-foot monument depicting him leading a group of peasants was also designed but never finished.

Pol Pot was driven from power by the invading Vietnamese in 1979. For the next few years he lived remotely on the Thai-Cambodian border, where he died either from heart failure or suicide in 1998. He had just heard on the Voice of America news broadcast that his former colleagues had decided to surrender him to an international tribunal investigating war crimes.

DH

"The transformation of Maoism into a political religion . . . resulted from an initiative from above and the spontaneous participation of the masses from below."

—Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*

"Rituals deifying Mao perpetuated the cult of Mao, involving millions of Chinese in the collective making of a living god."

—Xing Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*

"The extent of Mao's deification has no historical parallel, with the possible exception of Alexander the Great."

—Xing Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*

“Some continue to worship Mao at their family altars, praying to him for peace and safety.”

—Xing Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*

“In the future we will set up the Earth Control Committee, and make a uniform plan for the Earth.”

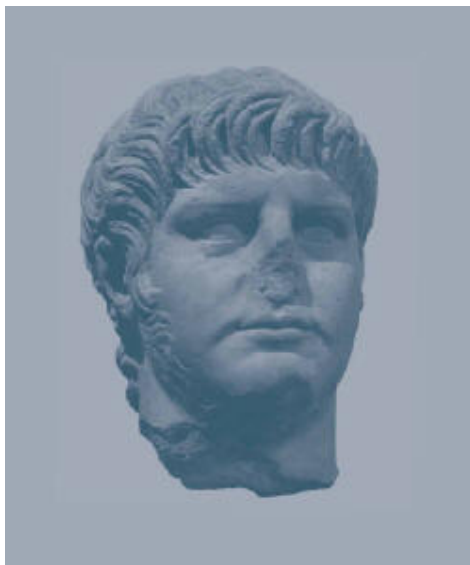
—Mao Zedong, Quoted by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday in *Mao: The Unknown Story*



## PART 10

### The Final False Messiah

*History abounds with would-be saviors who promised peace and prosperity. But without exception, they failed to deliver. Have we learned the lesson that no human being or form of government can deliver us or bring salvation in an ultimate sense?*



*History abounds with would-be saviors who promised peace and prosperity. But without exception, they failed to deliver. Have we learned the lesson that no human being or form of government can deliver us or bring salvation in an ultimate sense?*

A Ghanaian friend once related that as a child in school he was required by the authorities to repeat daily, “Nkrumah is the new Messiah.” At the same time, government radio was saying of the president, “Osagyefo [the Redeemer] is immortal and can never die.” All of this was a sure sign that yet another personality cult had emerged.

Ruling from 1957 to 1966, Kwame Nkrumah was the first to govern the postcolonial Gold Coast, or Ghana as it became known. According to historian Martin Meredith, in the lead-up to the declaration of political freedom, “party newspapers built up the image of a man of supernatural powers, a prophet, a new Moses who would lead his people toward the cherished land of independence. . . . Ordinary people came to regard him as a messiah capable of performing miracles.” Coincidentally, the hardworking, charismatic, nondenominational Christian and Marxist Nkrumah developed only one favorite piece of classical music—the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s Messiah.

Like many an aspiring political christos before him, Nkrumah suffered delusions of grandeur that put him in bad company. Meredith notes that, “believing himself to possess unique ability, capable of achieving for Africa what Marx and Lenin had done for Europe and Mao Tse-tung for China, he created an official ideology, calling it Nkrumahism.” He also suffered the ignominy of being deposed. The president’s indulgence in autocratic practices and his imprisonment of political opponents had compromised the development of his personality cult, and the people rose against him. While he was on a visit to China, the police and army

acted. Youth groups now marched through the streets with placards reading “Nkrumah is not our Messiah.” Rejected, he went into exile in nearby Guinea and died of cancer in Romania in 1972.

But once more the broader lesson about ruler cults went unheeded, especially in nearby Liberia. As a result, an echo of Nkrumah’s messianic pretensions (and departure) was heard in 2003, when the American-educated Liberian leader and warlord, Charles Taylor, was forced out of his country, only to find luxurious exile in Nigeria. Dressed entirely in white for his final speech, delivered from a velvet-covered throne, he compared himself with Jesus: “I would be the sacrificial lamb.” Over the decade of the 1990s, Taylor’s warmongering had promoted the use of child soldiers and brought about the deaths of 150,000 and the displacement of over half of Liberia’s population. He is to be tried for war crimes and crimes against humanity at the World Court in The Hague beginning in 2008.

Nkrumah and Taylor are simply two more in a long line of failed messiahs. They happen to be of African origin, but they differ little from their Asian or European counterparts. In this series about men who would be political gods—abetted only too often by many of their countrymen, and sometimes manipulating religious fervor or being manipulated by religious elites—we have witnessed the appeal of the political savior across many centuries and diverse lands and cultures. It is a universal problem. From ancient Babylon to Greece and Rome and the European Holy Roman Empire; from Napoleon’s neo-Roman empire to the awful axis of Mussolini and Hitler; from the communists Lenin and Stalin to their Asian counterparts Mao, Pol Pot and the Korean Kim dynasty—it seems that few places have escaped the depredations of the false messiah.

But just when humanity seems to have had enough of the catastrophes that political religions and their leaders produce, another imposter arises promising ultimate peace and prosperity and winning significant support from a misguided and desperate populace.

Isn’t it time to learn the lesson that no human being or form of government can deliver us or bring salvation in an ultimate sense?

### **COMMON TRAITS**

Do would-be messiahs have common identifying characteristics?

Even a cursory look at history tells us they do. The first and most obvious trait is that such men find ways to suggest that they are divine, or divinely appointed to solve all human problems, and thus establish their rule. Another is that they align themselves with the sun or the source of light. Then there is a fascination with the Roman Empire and/or preceding false messiahs. And their periods of rule are punctuated by the wholesale destruction of all opponents, real or perceived.

What would the final false messiah look like? Final seems the appropriate word, because we cannot know whether the next imposter will be the last. We do, however, have an indication that there will be a final counterfeit christ, and we even have a guide to his nature, as we will see.

We began this inquiry by examining Julius Caesar, the first Roman dictator to assert divinity in the pursuit of legitimacy. Caesar sought lifetime rule by claiming descent from the goddess Venus. He suggested that while he was still alive, he be worshiped as a god. It proved a fatal error. Such pride clashed with the ambitions of a group of Roman aristocrats, led by Brutus and Cassius, who assassinated him.

Caesar's quest for immortality was not new, however. The idea that kings were gods had long been part of Babylonian myth. Grasping the hands of the god Marduk in the temple atop the ziggurat, each new king was named the son of the god. Thus deified, he became protector of the Babylonian priesthood.

According to the biblical book of Daniel, Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar went so far as to set up a 90-foot golden statue and require his subjects to demonstrate loyalty by bowing to it. The image was quite possibly his own likeness, inspired by the interpretation of a dream he'd had about the future, in which he saw a huge statue of a man made from various metals and clay.

When Nebuchadnezzar set up the golden image in the plain outside Babylon, he preceded the Roman emperor Nero's similar act by about 650 years. Some ancient sources report that the infamous ruler and self-appointed deity planned a 100- to 120-foot golden statue of himself as Sol, or Apollo, the sun god.

The Roman Empire exerted such influence on the world from the time of Julius Caesar that it became an enduring model for government and rulership. Once the empire adopted Christianity in the third century, ecclesiastical leaders wielded terrible influence, and political powers used them to gain legitimacy. Religion has proven a useful tool in the hands of those who would be political gods, whether they are believers, agnostics or atheists. And it is not only in the West that religion has been abused by earthly powers. Even some aligned with Orthodox, pagan, Buddhist and Confucian traditions have seized on religious belief to strengthen their pursuit of power. It has happened across all political cultures. No system of human government seems to be secure from the rise (and fall) of the false messiah. From pagan imperial Rome to Christian imperial Rome, from the communist Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China to democratic Italy and Germany, no governmental form has prevented the rise of the megalomaniacal and murderous dictator-god.

When a political leader begins to speak in egocentric religious terms to validate his position, and his supporters urge him on, then begins the steady upward ratcheting motion of leader and led. The followers want a leader of superhuman abilities; the leader desires that recognition. The followers seek a messiah; the leader comes to believe he is that man.

In the accretion of this kind of power, millions of innocents have met their death. Yet all too often many of them were the same people who supported the man-god in his pursuit of power.

## **FORETELLING FALSE MESSIAHS**

What makes a leader a false messiah?

The inspiration for this series was a particular biblical phrase. It was something that, according to eyewitnesses, Jesus said in reply to a question about the end of this age of man. His disciples asked Him: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" His reply included a warning: "See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray" (Matthew 24:3–5, English Standard Version throughout; see also Luke 21 and Mark 13).

Has this statement been fulfilled over the past two thousand years, and if so, how? Typically people have interpreted Jesus' words to mean solely that religious figures would come claiming that they are the Messiah or the returning Christ. There is no question that there have been such imposters.

Simon Bar Kosiba was announced as the Messiah as he led Jewish fighters against Hadrian's Rome in 132. Renamed Bar Kokhba ("Son of the Star"—a messianic allusion), he was killed three years later along with 580,000 of his followers.

The young Jewish kabbalist from Smyrna, Sabbatai Sevi, managed to convince many among 17th-century Jewry in Europe, Africa and Asia that he was the Messiah to come. But under pressure from the Ottoman sultan he suddenly converted to Islam and saved his life.

Then there was the 19th-century Chinese self-proclaimed Christian messiah, Hong Xiuquan, who set up the Heavenly Kingdom in Nanjing. During the few years he prevailed, 20 million people died.

And in our time, the Korean religious leader Sun Myung Moon has claimed to be the returning Christ. Amazingly, at a celebration in a United States government building in Washington, D.C., in 2004, Moon was quoted as saying that he had been "sent to Earth . . . to save the world's six billion people. . . . Emperors, kings and presidents . . . have declared to all Heaven and Earth that Reverend Sun Myung Moon is none other than humanity's Savior, Messiah, Returning Lord and True Parent."

But such counterfeit messiahs are not the preeminent evidence of Jesus' statement. While they have deceived not a few, there are others who have deceived the majority in their own often sizable sphere of influence. If we analyze the term messiah carefully, we can arrive at a conclusion that helps explain much of the political messianic pretension of the past two thousand years and the deceit and destruction it has caused. For there have been many political messiahs who have attempted to steal the true Messiah's future role and have deceived many.

The word messiah has its origins in the Hebrew *mashiach*, meaning "anointed one." When a Hebrew was consecrated to become king, he was smeared with olive oil and became at that moment a "messiah." His "oiling" made him an anointed one. The equivalent term in the Greek of the New Testament is *christos*. There Jesus is the Anointed One, the Messiah or Christos. Hence His name in Greek is *Iesus Christos*; in English, *Jesus Christ*; and in Hebrew, *Yeshua Mashiach*.

A false messiah is one who comes "in His name," a counterfeit who declares himself the anointed one—that is to say, usurping Jesus Christ's ultimate authority to bring peace and prosperity to humanity. Such men claim to have the answers to human problems, to be able to deliver their people, to bring salvation. Yet as explained by the prophet Isaiah, it is only the true Messiah who can bring the kind of perfect government that humanity desperately needs. Isaiah wrote of Him in these terms: "The government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this" (Isaiah 9:6–7).

## **GOD-MEN BEFORE AND AFTER JESUS CHRIST**

The Roman emperor Augustus (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.) made messianic claims that preceded Jesus' warning about imposters to come. His forerunner, Julius Caesar, had been hailed the "universal savior of human life." In similar fashion, Augustus's subjects deified him as "savior" and "deliverer," perhaps in part because the Pax Romana, which began with Augustus, guaranteed relative peace in the so-called civilized world from Syria to Britain from 27 B.C.E. to 180 C.E. In addition Augustus and his successor, Tiberius, who reigned during Jesus' ministry (14–37), were each acclaimed "son of the god." Yet both these "divine" rulers passed from the scene, and three centuries later, after a succession of other deified

Caesars, the empire finally collapsed into a dark age. Certainly Roman imperial saviors had deceived many into believing they could deliver the ideal society.

In what comes as a surprise to many, even the first supposedly Christian emperor, Constantine, was guilty of claims to divinity. Historian John Julius Norwich writes that late in life the emperor was probably succumbing to religious megalomania: “From being God’s chosen instrument it was but a short step to being God himself, that summus deus in whom all other Gods and other religions were subsumed.”

Oddly, the emperor’s conversion to Christianity occurred only just before his death in 337, when he received a rite of baptism. Whether or not deathbed baptism was usual for people of the time, as some suggest, Constantine’s everyday way of life belied his claim to be a follower of Jesus, Paul and the early apostles. His part in the executions of his wife, his son and his sister’s stepson a year after presiding over the far-reaching ecclesiastical conference of Nicea indicate that he was anything but a true follower of Christ. Aspects of Christian belief influenced his rule, but his adherence to pagan ideas remained evident throughout his life.

In grandiose fashion, Constantine made sure that his memory would live on. For years he had referred to himself as the “Equal of the Apostles.” Accordingly, he planned his burial in Constantinople’s Church of the Holy Apostles, built during his rule. His last resting place was a sarcophagus flanked by other sarcophagi said to contain relics of the 12 apostles. He was thus, at the very least, the 13th apostle, or better yet, Christ Himself in the center of his original disciples—a false messiah in both life and death.

## **SCRIPTURAL ALLUSIONS**

This pattern of extravagant false claims to savior status has extended throughout subsequent political history. The book of Daniel provides another related perspective when it foretells the rise of the Roman Empire.

When Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the future, he told him not only about himself as the head of gold, but also about the meaning of the rest of the statue. The chest and arms of silver signified what we understand to be the Medo-Persian Empire; the belly and thighs of brass, the Greco-Macedonian; and the iron legs and the feet and toes of iron mixed with ceramic clay represented the Roman Empire and its revivals, which would continue until the true Messiah, represented in the king’s dream by a large falling stone, would bring an end to all human kingdoms and establish the kingdom of God on earth (see Daniel 2:31–45; see also “Thy Kingdom Come . . .”).

The prophet also tells of another dream of his own that centered on four beasts. They were a winged lion, a bear, a winged four-headed leopard, and an unusually fierce, marauding wild animal. Daniel writes: “After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns” (Daniel 7:7). The explanation is that the beast represents a fourth kingdom to come on the earth following the Babylonian, Medo-Persian and Greco-Macedonian empires. Again, the iron associated with the fourth beast identifies it as the Roman Empire.

In the late-first-century New Testament book of Revelation, we find several allusions to prophetic material in the book of Daniel. The author, John, writes, “I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth” (Revelation 13:1–2). Here is a composite of the first three empires mentioned by Daniel. Like the fourth beast in Daniel’s dream, it has ten horns

and all the heads of the other beasts, plus its own, making seven heads in all. Once again it is the Roman Empire, but this time it continues to the end of this age of man, though it sustains a serious wound. John writes, “One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast” (Revelation 13:3).

The Roman Empire was so severely wounded by its collapse in the west, conventionally dated to 476, that many declared it gone forever. Yet, as we have seen in this series, it survived. It was reinvented, reappearing in differing forms, but always with a backward glance at the might and model of ancient Rome.

### **ROMANS, EAST AND WEST**

The first such revival occurred at the hands of the Byzantine emperor Justinian (527–565). Ruling the remaining eastern branch of the Roman Empire from Constantinople, he succeeded in recapturing Italy and its North African possessions. The emperor’s religious policy emphasized the unity of church and state and the belief that the empire was the physical equivalent of a heavenly counterpart. He saw himself as Christ’s vice-regent and earthly equivalent, and as the defender of the orthodox faith. Yet he didn’t hesitate to exterminate one of his uncle Justin’s perceived competitors, nor to slaughter 30,000 of his own subjects following an insurrection—not the Christ we know from the Gospel message!

Soon after Justinian’s death the empire languished again, but it was only two hundred years later that a king arose equal to the task of recreating the empire in the west. Charlemagne the Frank became emperor of the Romans on Christmas Day in 800, when Pope Leo III placed the crown on his head after mass in St Peter’s. Italian historian Alessandro Barbero comments that the people of Rome recognized Charlemagne as emperor, “just as in previous times they had acclaimed Augustus and Constantine. Thus the Frankish king would become the successor to the Roman emperors.”

And so the Western Roman Empire was reborn.

Charlemagne understood himself to be divinely appointed and responsible for the spread and support of the Roman Christian religion across his empire. Rosamond McKitterick notes in her *Atlas of the Medieval World* that his efforts to organize ecclesiastical affairs “proved an effective long-term means for cultural imperialism and the spread of Frankish influence and Latin Christianity.”

According to Barbero, Charlemagne saw himself as the biblical David fighting pagan enemies. Nevertheless, his massacre of 4,500 unarmed, surrendered Saxons marred his reputation. As with other rulers who cruelly enforced the prevailing orthodoxy, Charlemagne’s harsh response to Saxon noncompliance was out of line with the spirit and teaching of the New Testament.

### **ROMAN RULE, GERMAN AND HOLY**

In the succeeding centuries, versions of the Roman Empire came and went at intervals. We have surveyed the reigns of Otto the Great (962–973) and Charles V (1519–56) as examples of the revival of the Christian Roman Empire in Germany and beyond. Were they also failed messiahs? In the sense that they saw themselves like Constantine and Charlemagne, as Christ’s representatives on earth, destined to maintain and defend the Roman imperial idea according to an imposed Catholic orthodoxy, they were not faithful to the vision and practice of the Savior they claimed to follow. In this they were counterfeits.

Otto's rule set the course of the German monarchy for almost nine centuries, during which Western Europe's relationship to the ancient Roman Empire was represented by papal approval of German emperors, while the papacy relied on German emperors for the defense of the Roman Church.

In 1519, five centuries after Otto, Charles V was elected (though not yet crowned) holy Roman emperor. According to biographer Karl Brandi, Charles's chancellor Gattinara wrote to the new emperor on this occasion: "Sire, God has been very merciful to you: he has raised you above all the Kings and princes of Christendom to a power such as no sovereign has enjoyed since your ancestor Charles the Great [Charlemagne]. He has set you on the way towards a world monarchy, towards the uniting of all Christendom under a single shepherd" (The Emperor Charles V, 1939). In 1520 in Charlemagne's capital of Aachen, Charles was crowned king of the Romans with Otto's imperial diadem.

Sixteen years later, he triumphantly entered Rome as one of his forebears of old had done, riding along the ancient Via Triumphalis on a white horse and clad in a purple cape. According to art historian Yona Pinson, "Charles had re-established himself as the legitimate successor to the Roman Empire" in the image of Marcus Aurelius, as a conqueror mounted on a horse. Though Charles eventually abdicated and spent his last days in seclusion at a Spanish monastery, his lifelong devotion to the Roman imperial idea and the religion that it enveloped was consistent with his self-view as a Catholic soldier of God. As Pinson also notes about Charles's vast public spectacle, the imperial entry at Lille, the "image of the ideal emperor" was on display as "Charlemagne's true heir and successor, Defender of the Church and the Faith," fused with "Caesar as the ruler of the world."

## **NEO-CAESARS**

The next reinvention of the empire came in post-revolutionary France. Napoleon Bonaparte had succeeded in engineering his own rise to power, so that by 1804 he was preparing for his imperial coronation. Three months before the event, he spent time in meditation at Charlemagne's tomb. He was enthralled with the "Father of Europe," to the point, some say, of thinking he was the reincarnation of the earlier emperor. The ninth-century ruler's influence was evident in a number of ways at the coronation ceremony. Even the crown was a copy of the one Charlemagne had worn. Official paintings of the occasion show Napoleon as a Roman emperor, sometimes with a victor's laurel wreath fashioned from gold.

Napoleon, like other French leaders before him, was sure that he had been destined to rule the Holy Roman Empire. The Habsburg king Francis II, determined not to allow Napoleon to usurp the empire, dissolved it in 1806. But Napoleon remained intent on dynasty and world dominion. Between 1792 and 1815, his aggression took his forces to almost every corner of the world.

He failed, of course, and with his death the idea of the medieval Roman Empire seemed to disappear. But its image lived on in the imagination of some, including those who established the Second Reich, or German Empire, in 1871. Indeed, the enduring memory of Charlemagne, Otto the Great and Frederick II appears to have influenced Adolf Hitler, whose Third Reich, joined with Benito Mussolini's fascist Italian state, proved so destructive in the 20th century.

It was Mussolini who in April 1922, a few months before the march on Rome that brought him to national power in Italy, declared, "We dream of Roman Italy—wise and strong, disciplined and imperial. Much of the immortal spirit of ancient Rome is reborn in Fascism!" According to Peter Godman's analysis of this speech, "Mussolini wished to be regarded as a new Augustus, a second Caesar . . . but also the Savior." By 1936, when his troops had successfully invaded Ethiopia, the Duce was able to proclaim that Italy again had its empire,

“an empire of peace, an empire of civilization and humanity.” His axis agreement with Hitler proved his downfall, however, and exposed the hollowness of his messianic claims. Captured and executed by partisans within days of Hitler’s own defeat, Mussolini’s corpse was put on public display and defiled.

As for Hitler, once he came to believe that he was not simply the precursor of the messianic leader he believed Germany needed, but the fulfillment, his delusions of grandeur knew no bounds. Historian Sir Ian Kershaw writes that by 1936, Hitler’s “narcissistic self-glorification had swollen immeasurably under the impact of the near-deification projected upon him by his followers. By this time he thought himself infallible. . . . The German people had shaped this personal hubris of the leader. They were about to enter into its full expression: the greatest gamble in the nation’s history—to acquire complete dominance of the European continent.”

Of course, the great gamble failed, and Hitler shot himself in his Berlin bunker as Soviet forces closed in on the city in 1945—truly a failed and false messiah.

In a departure from strict reinventions of the Roman Empire, we also considered Lenin, Stalin and Mao, and Mao’s messiah-like offspring, Pol Pot and the Kims of North Korea. If space and time had not precluded it, we could have investigated the Japanese ruler cult and the divinity accorded that nation’s emperors. But Asia’s communist leaders certainly aspired to messiah status, and the Soviet Union certainly had historical links to Rome through the Orthodox Church and its view of Moscow as the Third Rome. Religion also played a part in the Pol Pot regime and the Kim dynasty. In the one it was a sect of Buddhism and in the other a new syncretic religion fashioned from Pentecostalism and the Korean spirit of self-reliance (*Juche*). While the link with Rome is more tenuous in these latter two cases, the preoccupation with messiahship is all too evident. It was also certainly the case that millions died under the false liberation promised by these counterfeits.

### **AN INCIPIENT SUCCESSOR?**

Has the image of the Roman Empire now truly disappeared forever? If the past is any guide, it would be premature to say so. That imperial model, in association with a well-defined religious tradition, has come and gone many times. There are those who see the developing 27-nation European Union (EU) in imperial terms. When its leaders met in 2004 at the Campidoglio, the political and religious center of ancient Rome, they did so to celebrate their progress toward a European constitution. Inside the ornate Orazi and Curiazi hall, where the 1957 Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community had been signed, the leaders agreed to the constitution (not ratified as yet) under the gaze of the statues of 17th-century popes Urban VIII and his successor Innocent X. Perhaps not many of the dignitaries present appreciated the symbolism: the two pontiffs “overseeing” the event were the very ones who had witnessed the division of Europe and the profound weakening of the Holy Roman Empire as a result of the Thirty Years’ War and the consequent Treaty of Westphalia.

The framers of the constitution carefully avoided any reference to Europe’s Christian heritage, however, despite the protests of the Vatican. At this point, the EU is envisioned merely as a secular power. Though it has only an incipient military force and lacks a unified foreign policy, the union already has varying degrees of economic, legislative and judicial power over its wide swath of nations. Its geographic expanse is beginning to rival the original. Thus, in terms of Daniel’s dream, it may yet prove to be the precursor of another powerful iteration of the idea and image of the ancient Roman Empire.

In the historical examples we have studied, each manifestation of the false messiah and each Roman revival has been different from its predecessor(s). The intervals between such individuals and systems have also been diverse. This leads us to the thought that while it is impossible to predict when such a leader and system will emerge, whatever dictatorial guise



the final messiah will finally take on, it will be novel and, because the world and its economy are now truly global in nature, will very likely have near universal appeal. Surely both the leadership and the system will seem to hold the promise of solving all of humanity's problems on a global basis. The Italian political scientist Emilio Gentile recognizes the inherent difficulty of forecasting, but he warns, "We cannot rule out that new figures will emerge from the difficulties, tensions, and conflicts of the next phase of profound, traumatic, and irreversible change who will be convinced that they have finally understood the true meaning and purpose of human existence. Armed with this comprehensive solution to all evils, they will confer a sacred nature on their ideas and movement, and will consider it right and proper to fight a holy war with intransigence, intolerance, and violence in order to establish a better world."

From the vantage point of the present, if the final system were to embrace democracy, free-market economics, and some form of ecumenical sharing of religious authority for the sake of all peoples and beliefs, it would provide humanity with an offer seemingly too good to turn down. Already many seem to anticipate a globalized democratic world order as their only savior.

Interestingly, the often puzzling book of Revelation has sections devoted to a description of the final system and its leadership, which is an extension of the old Roman order in some way. It is clear that the system will gain worldwide acceptance (Revelation 13:7–8) and will bring peace and prosperity on a very wide scale before it, too, falls. What we read about in Revelation is a global economic, military, and politico-religious system. A description of its tradable goods is found in chapter 18, verses 11–13, and includes "gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls." It is almost like reading a modern commodity report. Substitute "armaments" for "chariots," and you have what the world trades in today.

Ominously, the system also traffics in human beings, their minds and their bodies. This is the same system that Daniel and John described as being irrevocably broken by the coming of the one true Messiah to set up a kingdom of universal peace, justice and righteousness. Then, to the everlasting relief of humanity, the era of the false messiahs will be over.

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"We don't just follow our leaders. We anxious and dependent followers often set them up via a process that can generate at least two kinds of toxic monsters: leaders who leap at the chance to play godlike roles, and leaders who eventually—because their followers keep kowtowing before them—come to believe that they really have the powers their anxious and needy followers want to ascribe to them."

—Harold J. Leavitt, *Top Down*

“It was in the East that men had learned to believe in a single universal society, and in the government of that society by a king who was ‘as a god among men,’ and indeed was a very god.”

—Ernest Barker, “The Conception of Empire” (In *The Legacy of Rome*, Edited by Cyril Bailey, 1923)

“The Empire . . . was a ‘salvation.’ Religious feelings supported its institution and continuance; and that religious feeling was one of adoration for a present god, sent by Providence for the ending of war and the saving of the community of the human race.”

—Ernest Barker, “The Conception of Empire” (In *The Legacy of Rome*, Edited by Cyril Bailey, 1923)

“The fanaticism of good intentions, all-encompassing truths, and simplistic solutions will always be a breeding ground for the sacralization of politics.”

—Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*

“The springs from which beliefs and myths flow to bestow a sacred nature on politics are unlikely to dry up in the near future, but it is still impossible to predict in what ways new civil and political religions could be formed or what the outcomes could be.”

—Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*

“Several researchers have pointed to a process of resacralization currently under way, to a new politicization of the traditional religions and a new ‘religionizing’ of politics.”

—Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*

“After our experience of the political religions of the twentieth century, which, despite their spectacular recent collapse, are far from dead, we should perhaps resign ourselves to recognizing that even the absurd and the inhuman may arouse enthusiastic faith and religious belief.”

—Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*