The early church was anything but a refuge for slaves and the impoverished masses, as illustrated by this portrait (ca. 300) of the Christian Galla Placidia and her children, done in gold leaf on glass.

The Class Basis of Early Christianity

FOR MOST of the twentieth century historians and sociologists agreed that, in its formative days, Christianity was a movement of the dispossessed—a haven for Rome's slaves and impoverished masses. Friedrich Engels was an early proponent, claiming that "Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome" (Marx and Engels 1967: 316). These views seem to have first gained ascendancy among scholars in Germany. Thus New Testament scholars trace this view to Deissmann ([1908] 1978, 1929), while sociologists look to Troeltsch ([1911] 1931), who claimed that in fact *all* religious movements are the work of the "lower strata." Marxists also look to Germany in this same period for Kautsky's ([1908] 1953) elaborate expansion of Engels's views into an orthodox analysis of Christianity as a proletarian movement, which, he claimed, even achieved true communism briefly. Moreover, many scholars confidently attributed this conception of early Christians' social origins to Paul on the basis of his first letter to the Corinthians, in which he notes that not many of the wise, mighty, or noble are called to the faith. By the 1930s this view of Christian origins was largely unchallenged.[1] Thus the well-known Yale historian Erwin R. Goodenough wrote in a widely adopted college textbook: "Still more obvious an indication of the undesirability of Christianity in Roman eyes was the fact that its converts were drawn in an overwhelming majority from the lowest classes of society. Then as now the governing classes were apprehensive of a movement which brought into a closely

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knit and secret organization the servants and slaves of society" (1931:37).

In recent decades, however, New Testament historians have begun to reject this notion of the social basis of the early Christian movement. E. A. Judge was perhaps the first major scholar of the present generation to raise a vigorous dissent. He began by dismissing the lack of noble Christians as an irrelevancy:

> If the common assertion that Christian groups were constituted from the lower orders of society is meant to imply that they did not draw upon the upper orders of the Roman ranking system, the observation is correct, and pointless. In the eastern Mediterranean it was self-evident that members of the Roman aristocracy would not belong to a local cult association . . . [Moreover they] amounted to an infinitesimally small fraction of the total population. (1960:52)

After a careful analysis of the ranks and occupations of persons mentioned in the sources, Judge concluded:

> Far from being a socially depressed group, then, . . . the Christians were dominated by a socially pretentious section of the population of big cities. Beyond that they seem to have drawn on a broad constituency, probably representing the household dependents of leading members. . . .
>
> But the dependent members of city households were by no means the most debased section of society. If lacking freedom, they still enjoyed security, and a moderate prosperity. The peasantry and persons in slavery on the land were the most underprivileged classes. Christianity left them largely untouched. (60)

Moreover, Judge perceptively noted that the "proof text" in 1 Cor. 1:26–28 had been overinterpreted: Paul did not say his followers included *none* of the wise, mighty, or noble—merely that there were "not many" such persons, which means that there were *some*. Indeed, based on an inscription found in Corinth in 1929 and upon references in Rom. 16:23 and 2 Tim. 4:20, many

scholars now agree that among the members of the church at Corinth was Erastus, "the city treasurer" (Furnish 1988:20). And historians now accept that Pomponia Graecina, a woman of the senatorial class, whom Tacitus reported as having been accused of practicing "foreign superstition" in 57 (*Annals* 13.32, 1989 ed.), was a Christian (Sordi 1986). Nor, according to Marta Sordi, was Pomponia an isolated case: "We know from reliable sources that there were Christians among the aristocracy [in Rome] in the second half of the first century (Acilius Glabrio and the Christian Flavians) and that it seems probable that the same can be said for the first half of the same century, before Paul's arrival in Rome" (1986:28).

Since Judge first challenged the proletarian view of the early church, a consensus has developed among New Testament historians that Christianity was based in the middle and upper classes (Scroggs 1980). Thus Jean Danielou and Henri Marrou (1964:240) discussed the prominent role of "rich benefactors" in the affairs of the early church. Robert M. Grant (1977:11) also denied that early Christianity was "a proletarian mass movement," and argued that it was "a relatively small cluster of more or less intense groups, largely middle class in origin." Abraham J. Malherbe (1977:29–59) analyzed the language and style of early church writers and concluded that they were addressing a literate, educated audience. In his detailed study of the church at Corinth in the first century, Gerd Theissen (1982:97) identified wealthy Christians including members of "the upper classes." Robin Lane Fox (1987:311) wrote of the presence "of women of high status." Indeed, soon after Judge's book appeared, the Marxist historian Heinz Kreissig (1967) recanted the proletarian thesis.[2] Kreissig identified the early Christians as drawn from "urban circles of well-situated artisans, merchants, and members of the liberal professions" (quoted in Meeks 1983:214).

Curiously, this new view is a return to an earlier historical tradition. Although Edward Gibbon was often quoted in sup-

port of the proletarian thesis—"the new sect of Christians was almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace, of peasants and mechanics, of boys and women, of beggars and slaves" ([1776–1788] 1960:187)—he had actually preceded this line by identifying it as "a very odious imputation." To the contrary, Gibbon argued, Christianity necessarily would have included many from the lower ranks simply because most people belonged to these classes. But he saw no reason to think that the lower classes were disproportionately represented among Christians.

During the nineteenth century many famous historians went further than Gibbon and argued that the lower classes were disproportionately *under*-represented in the early church. Indeed, W. M. Ramsay wrote in his classic study that Christianity "spread first among the educated more rapidly than among the uneducated; nowhere had it a stronger hold . . . than in the household and at the court of the emperors" (1893:57). Ramsay attributed similar views to the famous German classicist Theodor Mommsen. And, just as his many German contemporaries were promulgating the proletarian thesis, Adolf Harnack (1908: 2:35) noted that Ignatius, in his letter to the Christian congregation in Rome, expressed his concern lest they interfere with his martyrdom (see chapter 8). Harnack pointed to the obvious conclusion that Ignatius took it for granted that Christians in Rome had "the power" to gain him a pardon, "a fear which would have been unreasonable had not the church contained members whose riches and repute enabled them to intervene in this way either by bribery or by the exercise of personal influence."

Thus we come full circle. Obviously, if we wish to understand the rise of Christianity, we shall need to know something about its primary recruitment base—who joined? I am satisfied that the new view among historians is essentially correct. Nevertheless, *any* claim about the social basis of early Christianity must remain precarious, at least in terms of direct evidence, and it is unlikely that we shall ever have much more than the fragments

of historical data we already possess. But there is another approach to this matter: to reconstruct the probable class basis of Christianity from some very well tested sociological propositions about the social basis of new religious movements. Indeed, this seems the best topic with which to begin my efforts at reconstruction because historians do not regard this as a controversial matter. Thus as I am able to show the close correspondence between my theoretical conclusions and the data assembled by historians, the latter may place greater confidence in the reconstructive enterprise per se. The fundamental thesis is simply put: If the early church was like all the other cult movements for which good data exist, it was not a proletarian movement but was based on the more privileged classes.

Class, Sect, and Cult

William Sims Bainbridge and I have distinguished between *sect* movements and *cult* movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1979, 1985, 1987). The former occur by schism within a conventional religious body when persons desiring a more otherworldly version of the faith break away to "restore" the religion to a higher level of tension with its environment. This is the process of sect formation analyzed by H. Richard Niebuhr (1929). Sociologists can cite both theory and considerable research to show that those who take part in sect movements are, if not the dispossessed, at least of lower social standing than those who stick with the parent body.

Cult movements, on the other hand, are not simply new organizations of an old faith; they are *new faiths*, at least new in the society being examined. Cult movements always start small—someone has new religious ideas and begins to recruit others to the faith, or an alien religion is imported into a society where it then seeks recruits. In either case, as new faiths, cult movements violate prevailing religious norms and are often the target of considerable hostility.

For a long time the thesis that religious movements originate in lower-class deprivation was generalized to all religious movements—not only to sects but to cult movements as well. Thus not only were sects such as the Free Methodists and the Seventh-Day Adventists regarded as lower-class movements, so too were the Mormons, Theosophists, and Moonies. No distinction was made between cults and sects (cf. Wallis 1975); all were seen as protest movements and therefore as essentially proletarian (Niebuhr 1929). Moreover, the proletarian basis of many religious movements often has simply been asserted as if self-evident without the slightest effort's being made to assess who actually joined. Thus Gay confidently informed his readers about English converts to Mormonism, "most of whom were poor" (1971). He gives not the slightest clue as to how he knows this. As we shall see, it very likely was not true *unless*, in the context of nineteenth-century Britain, the Mormons were perceived as a Protestant sect rather than as a new religion.

Recently, however, the manifest absurdity of imputing a proletarian base to many new religious movements has overwhelmed sociological certitude. Indeed, when one examines what is involved in accepting a new faith (as opposed to being recruited by an energetic organization based on a conventional faith), it is easy to see why these movements must draw upon the more privileged for their recruits. As a useful introduction to this discussion, I will assess current sociological theory on the relationship between social class and religious commitment in general.

Class and Commitment

As with the social basis of religious movements, so too sociologists long assumed that the lower classes were more religious than the rich. Since the founders of modern social science, from Marx to Freud, all regarded religion as a compensator for

thwarted desires, as false consciousness or neurotic illusion, the prevailing sociological orthodoxy held that religious commitment served primarily to assuage the suffering of the poor and deprived. The results of early survey studies came as a rude surprise: a series of investigators called the roll and found the deprived conspicuously absent from church membership and Sunday services (Stark 1964). This led to a revision of the deprivation thesis when it was discovered that religious commitment consists of a number of somewhat independent dimensions (Glock 1959; Stark and Glock 1968) and that the poor tend to be more religious on some of these dimensions while the rich are more religious on others (Demerath 1965; Glock and Stark 1965; Stark 1971). Thus negative correlations were found between social class and accepting traditional religious beliefs, having religious and mystical experiences, and frequency of personal prayers. In contrast, there are positive correlations between social class and church membership, attendance at worship services, participation in church activities, and saying grace before meals. But there seem to be no correlations between social class and belief in life after death or in the existence of heaven. Recently this array of empirical findings has been encompassed by three propositions linking power or class position to forms of religious commitment.

The starting point is to notice that religion can in fact compensate people for their inability to gain certain things they desire. However, the inability of humans to satisfy desires has *two* quite different aspects. First, some people are unable to gain desired rewards that are only *scarce*—rewards that others are able to obtain, or to obtain in more ample amounts. These include the tangible rewards such as wealth and health, the lack of which underlies all deprivation interpretations of religion. Clearly, religions provide a variety of effective mechanisms by which people can endure such deprivations, including promises that earthly sacrifice will merit heavenly recompense. But we must also recognize a *second* aspect of deprivation: the ability

of religion to compensate people for desired rewards that seem to be absolutely *unavailable* to anyone, at least in this life. The most obvious of these, and perhaps the one most intensely sought by humans, is victory over death. No one, rich or poor, can gain eternal life by direct methods in the here and now. The only plausible source of such a reward is through religion, and the fulfillment of this promise is postponed to another world, a world known only through religious means. Finally, we must recognize that as organized social enterprises, religions are a source of *direct rewards* to members. That is, religious organizations reward some people with status, income, self-esteem, social relations, entertainment, and a host of other things they value. These distinctions lead to the following propositions (Stark and Bainbridge 1980).

First: *The power of an individual or group will be* positively *associated with control of religious organizations and with gaining the rewards available from religious organizations.*

Second: *The power of an individual or group will be* negatively *associated with acceptance of religious compensators for rewards that actually exist.*

Third: Regardless *of power, persons and groups will tend to accept religious compensators for rewards that do not exist in this world.*

The second of these propositions captures the long tradition of deprivation theories of religion: that the poor will pray while the rich play. We may call this the *otherworldly* or sectlike form of religious commitment. The first proposition, on the other hand, explains the relative absence of the lower classes from more conventional religious organizations, for it captures the religious expression of privilege. We can call this the *worldly* or churchlike dimension of religious commitment. The third proposition can be called the *universal* aspect of religious commitment, since it notes that in certain respects everyone is potentially deprived and in need of the comforts of faith. It is this proposition that explains why the upper classes are religious at all, why they too are susceptible to faith (something Marxist

theories can only dismiss as aberration or as a phoney pose meant to lull the proletariat into false consciousness). Moreover, the third proposition helps explain why the more privileged are drawn to cult movements.

The Appeal of New Religions

It is obvious that people do not embrace a new faith if they are content with an older one. New religions must always make their way in the market openings left them by weaknesses in the conventional religion(s) of a society. In later chapters I shall explore the conditions under which conventional faiths fail to serve substantial population segments. Here it is sufficient to point out that as weaknesses appear in conventional faiths, some people will recognize and respond to these weaknesses sooner than others. For example, as the rise of modern science caused difficulties for some traditional Christian teachings, this was recognized sooner by more educated people. In similar fashion, as the rise of Greek and Roman science and philosophy caused difficulties for pagan teachings, this too was first noticed by the educated (deVries 1967). To state this as a proposition: *Religious skepticism is most prevalent among the more privileged.*

But skepticism does not entail a general immunity to the essential supernaturalism of all religions. For example, although sociologists have long believed that people who give their religious affiliation as "none" are primarily secular humanists, considerable recent research shows this not to be the case. Most such people are merely indicating a lack of conviction in a conventional brand of faith, for they are also the group *most* likely to express interest in belief in unconventional mystical, magical, and religious doctrines. For example, "nones" are the group of Americans most willing to accept astrology, yoga, reincarnation, ghosts, and the like (Bainbridge and Stark 1980, 1981). Moreover, people who report their original religious

background as "none" are extremely overrepresented in the ranks of converts to new religious movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

It is surely not surprising that people who lack an anchorage in a conventional faith are most prone to embrace a new one. Nor should it be any surprise that people from privileged backgrounds are more likely to have weakened ties to a conventional faith. But can it really be true that it is the privileged who are most likely to embrace new religious movements? This is precisely what we ought to expect when we realize that conversion to a new religion involves being interested in *new culture*—indeed, in being capable of mastering new culture.

Studies of early adopters of cultural innovations have long found them to be well above average in terms of income and education (Larsen 1962). What is true of new technology, fashions, and attitudes ought also to be true in the realm of faith. For new religions always involve *new ideas.* Consider citizens of the Roman world as they first confronted the Pauline church. This was not simply a call to intensify their commitment to a familiar faith (as sect movements always are). Instead of calling Romans to return to the gods, Paul called them to embrace a new worldview, a new conception of reality, indeed to accept a *new* God. While sects are able to appeal to people of little intellectual capacity by drumming the old, familiar culture, new religions find such people difficult to reach. Thus they must gain their hearings from people of social standing and privilege.

But why would such people join? Most of the time most of them will not, which is why it is so rare for a new religion to succeed despite the thousands of them that are born. But sometimes there is substantial discontent with conventional faith among the more privileged. That the less privileged become discontented when a religious organization becomes too worldly to continue to offer them potent compensators for scarce rewards (proposition 2) is well known—this is the basis of sect movements. But there has been little awareness that sometimes a traditional faith and its organized expression can

become so worldly that it cannot serve the *universal* need for religious compensators (proposition 3). That is, religious bodies can become so empty of supernaturalism that they cannot serve the religious needs of the privileged either. At such moments, the privileged will seek new options. Indeed, it is the privileged who will be most aware of erosions of the plausibility structure of conventional faiths.

In short, people must have a degree of privilege to have the sophistication needed to understand new religions and to recognize a need for them. This is not to say that the *most* privileged will be most prone to embrace new religious movements, but only that converts will be from the more, rather than the less, privileged classes. Indeed, Wayne Meeks (1983) proposes *relative deprivation* as a major source of recruits to the early church—that people having substantial privilege, but less than they felt they deserved, were especially likely to convert.

The Class Composition of Contemporary New Religions

Recently a considerable body of data has been amassed on who joins new religious movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Let us begin with the Mormons since they are the most successful new religion to appear in many centuries—indeed, they seem on the threshold of becoming a new world faith (Stark 1984, 1994).

Mormonism was not and is not a proletarian movement. It began in one of the most "prosperous, and relatively sophisticated areas" of western New York, an area with a high proportion of cosmopolitan Yankee residents and one that surpassed other parts of the state in the proportion of children enrolled in school (O'Dea 1957:10). Those who first accepted Joseph Smith's teachings were better educated than their neighbors and displayed considerable intellectualism. Consider too that in their first city, Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1841 the Mormons estab-

lished a municipal university at a time when higher education was nearly nonexistent in the United States. Moreover, within several years of the church's founding, non-Mormon neighbors in Missouri and Illinois began to complain that the Mormons were buying up the best land and displacing them. These were not collective purchases by the church but private ventures by individual Mormons, which is further evidence of the converts' relative privilege (Arrington and Bitton 1979).[3]

In similar fashion Christian Science sprang to prominence by attracting the relatively affluent, not the downtrodden. Wilson (1961) noted the unusual number of English Christian Scientists with titles and the abundance of well-known and aristocratic family names among members. The U.S. Census data on American denominations, published during the first third of this century, reveal that Christian Science far surpassed all other denominations in terms of per capita expenditures, justifying the impression of the group as disproportionately affluent. Spiritualism, too, found its base in the middle and upper classes both in the United States and in Great Britain (Nelson 1969; Stark, Bainbridge, and Kent 1981). In her studies of members of the Unification Church (more widely known as the Moonies), Eileen Barker (1981, 1984) found English converts to be many times more likely than others their age to be university graduates. The same is true of American converts. Americans who have joined various Hindu faiths also follow the rule: 89 percent of members of Ananda (Nordquist 1978) and 81 percent of members of Satchidanana (Volinn 1982) had attended college.

Survey research studies of general populations confirm these case study results. Table 2.1 is based on a 1973 sample of the San Francisco area (Wuthnow 1976). Here we can see that persons who have attended college were several times as likely to report that they were at least somewhat attracted to three Eastern religions that, in an American setting, qualify as cult movements. Moreover, persons who had gone to college were three times as likely as others to report that they had taken part in

TABLE 2.1
Education and Attraction to Cults

	Attended College	*Did Not Attend College*
Attracted to:		
Transcendental Meditation	17%	6%
Yoga	27%	12%
Zen	17%	5%
Claimed to have taken part in one of these groups	16%	5%

TABLE 2.2
Education and Involvement in Cults and Sects

	College	*High School*	*Grade School*
Sect Involvement			
Has been involved in faith healing	6%	7%	11%
Has been "born again"	27%	36%	42%
Cult Involvement			
Has been involved in:			
Yoga	5%	2%	0%
Transcendental Meditation	7%	3%	2%
Eastern religions	2%	1%	0%
Mysticism	3%	1%	0%

one of these groups. Table 2.2 is based on a 1977 Gallup Poll of the adult U.S. population. The top section of the table shows that the less educated are substantially more likely to report that they have had a "born again" experience, and to have been involved in "faith healing." This is as it should be, for, in an American context, these are *sect* activities—associated with higher-tension Christian denominations. However, the remainder of the table involves *cult* activities. And once again we see

TABLE 2.3

Education of Contemporary American Religious Groups

	Percent Who Attended College
Denominations[a]	
Roman Catholic	48%
Jewish	76%
Episcopal	70%
Congregational (United Church of Christ)	63%
Presbyterian	61%
Methodist	46%
Lutheran	45%
Sects	
Assemblies of God	37%
Nazarene	34%
Jehovah's Witnesses	23%
Worldwide Church of God	10%
Cults	
New Age	67%
Scientology	81%
Wiccan	83%
Eckankar	90%
Deity	100%
Total	81%
Mormons	55%
Irreligious	
None	53%
Agnostic	72%

[a] Baptists have been omitted because they constitute such a mixture of sects and denominations, and because of the confounding effect of race.

that the college educated show the largest proportion of participants, followed by those with only high school educations, with the grade school educated being almost devoid of cult participation.

Finally, table 2.3 reports the findings of the 1989–1990 National Survey of Religious Identification. Conducted by Barry A. Kosmin and his colleagues, it is the largest survey of American religious affiliation ever conducted—113,000 cases. Because the sample was so immense, it is possible to assemble a significant number of persons who named a cult movement when asked their religious affiliation. When we examine the data, it is no surprise that members of the major denominations tend to be college-educated—indeed, three-fourths of American Jews have been to college. Nor is it a surprise that most members of Protestant sects are not well educated—only 10 percent of members of the Worldwide Church of God have attended college.

But notice the cult groups.[4] They are the most educated groups—exceeding even Jews and Episcopalians in terms of the percentage of members who have attended college. Admittedly, the percentages for individual groups are based on small numbers of cases—only twelve people gave their religious affiliation as New Age, and only ten named Eckankar. But the findings are extremely consistent across groups, and when the cases are totaled, we see that, overall, 81 percent of members of American cult movements have been to college. Indeed, cult members are more likely to have attended college than are those who claim no religious preference or who claim to be agnostics.

Technically, the Mormons still constitute a cult movement within the religious definitions operative in the United States. However, they have endured so long and have grown so large that their tension with their social environment has been greatly reduced. And, just as Christianity did not remain a middle- and upper-class movement forever but eventually penetrated all classes, the Mormons are not as singularly based on

the educated as are the other cult movements shown in the table. Moreover, these data include all Mormons, not just recent converts—while the data on the other groups would be unlikely to include any second-generation members. Nevertheless, the Mormons display a high proportion of college-attenders (55 percent), thus conforming to the general proposition that new religious movements are based on the privileged.

Clearly, then, not just any unconventional religion is an outlet for proletarian discontent. It is not poor kids who are running off and joining cult movements in contemporary America. Indeed, Volinn (1982) found that more than two-thirds of the members of Satchidanana had college-educated parents! Cult movements, insofar as we have any data on their members, are based on the more, not the less, privileged. But can we apply this rule to early Christianity?

Christianity as a Cult Movement

During his ministry, Jesus seems to have been the leader of a sect movement within Judaism. Indeed, even in the immediate aftermath of the Crucifixion, there was little to separate the disciples from their fellow Jews. However, on the morning of the third day something happened that turned the Christian sect into a cult movement.

Christians believe that on that day Jesus arose from the dead and during the next forty days appeared repeatedly to various groups of his followers. It is unnecessary to believe in the Resurrection to see that because the apostles believed in it, they were no longer just another Jewish sect. Although it took time for the fact to be recognized fully (in part because of the immense diversity of Judaism in this era), beginning with the Resurrection Christians were participants in a new religion, one that added far too much new culture to Judaism to be any longer an internal sect movement. Of course, the complete break between church and synagogue took centuries, but it

seems clear that Jewish authorities in Jerusalem quickly labeled Christians as heretics beyond the boundaries of the community in the same way that Moonies are today excluded from Christian associations.

Moreover, whatever the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, when historians speak of the *early* church, they do not mean the church in Jerusalem but the Pauline church—for this is the church that triumphed and changed history. And there can be no doubt that Christianity was not a sect movement within conventional paganism. The early church was a cult movement in the context of the empire, just as the Mormons were a cult movement in the context of nineteenth-century America (and remain a cult in the eyes of evangelical Christians).

If this is so, and if cult movements are based on a relatively privileged constituency, can we not infer that Paul's missionary efforts had their greatest success among the middle and upper middle classes, just as New Testament historians now believe? In my judgment such an inference is fully justified unless a convincing case can be made that basic social and psychological processes were different in the days of Rome from what they are now—that in antiquity the human mind worked on different principles. Some historians might be tempted to embrace such an assertion, but no competent social scientist would consider it for a moment. Moreover, evidence based on a list of the earliest converts to Islam supports the conclusion that from the start, Muhammad's followers came from among young men of considerable privilege (Watt 1961).

Conclusion

I am fully aware that this chapter does not "prove" that the early church had its greatest appeal to the solid citizens of the empire. Had Paul sent out not simply letters but also questionnaires, such proof might be forthcoming. But it is idle to de-

mand certainty where none ever will be forthcoming. Moreover, science does not proceed by testing empirically each and every application of its theories. (When physicists go to a baseball game, they count hits, runs, and errors like everyone else. They do not keep score on whether each fly ball comes back down.) The whole point of theories is to *generalize* and hence to escape the grip of perpetual trial and error. And the point of sociological generalizations such as *Cult movements overrecruit persons of more privileged backgrounds* is to rise above the need to plead ignorance pending adequate evidence on every specific group.

Finally, what difference does it make whether early Christianity was a movement of the relatively privileged or of the downtrodden? In my judgment it matters a great deal. Had Christianity actually been a proletarian movement, it strikes me that the state necessarily would have responded to it as a *political* threat, rather than simply as an illicit religion. With Marta Sordi (1986), I reject claims that the state did perceive early Christianity in political terms. It is far from clear to me that Christianity could have survived a truly comprehensive effort by the state to root it out during its early days. When the Roman state did perceive political threats, its repressive measures were not only brutal but unrelenting and extremely thorough—Masada comes immediately to mind. Yet even the most brutal persecutions of Christians were haphazard and limited, and the state ignored thousands of persons who openly professed the new religion, as we will see in chapter 8. If we postulate a Christianity of the privileged, on the other hand, this behavior by the state seems consistent. If, as is now believed, the Christians were not a mass of degraded outsiders but from early days had members, friends, and relatives in high places—often within the imperial family—this would have greatly mitigated repression and persecution. Hence the many instances when Christians were pardoned. I shall return to these matters in later chapters.

In conclusion, it might be well to confess how I came to write

the essay on which this chapter is based. Having begun to read about the early church, I encountered Robin Scroggs's (1980) discussion of the new view that Christianity was not a proletarian movement. My immediate reaction was, "Of course it wasn't; cult movements never are." And that is precisely what this chapter has attempted to spell out.