CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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For Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'identity is a kind of virtual focus to which we must refer in order to explain a certain number of things, but without it ever having any real existence' (Lévi-Strauss 1983, 156). Indeed, when applied to a group, Joël Candau notes, the term 'identity' is inappropriate because it can never designate a sameness: two people are never identical to each other (Candau 1998). Therefore it is certainly open to question whether we can speak of 'pagans' and 'Christians' in their generality, unless we adopt the religious framework of the ancient Church Fathers, which is precisely based on binary thinking. The term 'identity' is then used in a rather loose sense, close to the notion of likeness. In this case, then, cultural or collective identity is necessarily a representation constructed by the narrator on the basis of shared codes of meaning, shared heritages. Does collective identity exist, in the end, only in narrative processes? In texts? Can collective identity

be a state? A concrete state visible in a specific materiality that archaeology would capture? A group may share a memorial core, a cultural foundation or substratum, or what Ernest Gellner calls a 'fixed cognitive capital' that gives the group in question an identity (Gellner 1986, 38). This assertion, though accepted by many, is open to criticism. For it seems inaccurate to use the expressions 'cultural identity' and 'collective identity' to refer to a supposed state of the whole group when only a part of its members share the state in question and this common set of features, norms and beliefs is subject to the passing of time and incessant change.

In short, there can undoubtedly be *this* pagan or *this* Christian, *these* pagans or *these* Christians, but not *the* pagans or *the* Christians – just as in Evans-Pritchard (1940) there is *this* Nuer, *these* Nuer, but not *the* Nuer. Therefore, if one makes identity a fact or a reality, does one not hypostasise the collective – in this case, a pagan and Christian collective that is characterised first of all by a great variety of situations and can never be determined by a binary opposition, as the Fathers of the Church, imperial decrees, legal texts and pagan literature seek to do? Pagans and Christians of Late Antiquity exist only in the variety of behaviours and situations that the archaeological and literary records presented in this book document.

Indeed, identities are not constructed on the basis of a stable and objectively definable set of cultural traits but are produced and modified within the framework of relationships, reactions and social interactions from which emerge feelings of belonging and identity or ethnic worldviews, sometimes transient, sometimes visible, sometimes not. Should we look for distinctive signs, precise markers affirming a pagan or Christian identity? Yet this is to fall into the trap of rhetorical and narrative constructions that define and demarcate states. The religious landscape clearly differed between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. The late Roman empire, its successor states, and other emerging nations in Europe exhibited great regional variation with regard to religion, and often religious affiliations were anything but stable over time.

Éric Rebillard (Chapter 2) thus wonders about the existence of a material culture that made it possible to define a Christian or a pagan. Considering this from our contemporary world, we necessarily look for distinctive signs of religious states; but these are ultimately difficult to identify. Certain testimonies, few in number, such as sarcoph-

agi with biblical scenes or a few inscriptions clearly link individuals to their religion. Further, the presence of church buildings (especially from the 5th century onwards) makes it possible to identify Christian communities in the empire. However, these materialities do not create a collective identity; they are rather part of situations where one expresses one's attachment to one's religion or to a precise religious function, the existence of a community outside of any collective behaviour. It is therefore difficult to make the link between material culture and religious identity, as Rebillard argues.

The burials studied by Frédérique Blaizot (Chapter 3) are revealing of the variability of practices and their inconstant relationship with the religious norm. Thus, Christian graves are almost invisible in the 4th century and beyond. From the 5th century onwards, the graves *are* Christian simply because the society is Christian. But in no way do they define a Christian identity, except by their clustering around churches. In truth, in the 4th century, if there were no distinctive signs to identify pagan or Christian tombs, one might wonder whether the grouping of graves, within the same cemetery or in a specific necropolis, was not enough to create the recognition of a religious group which was only meaningful locally. The topography had to make sense. The problem is that topographical markers can only rarely identify the settlement of a religious group. As for funerary customs, they are part of rites of passage that have, for a long time, respected local custom, which it is customary to do, rather than dogmatic rules laid down by the Church: this is shown by the disparities encountered in urban and rural necropolises within the same city, studied by Blaizot.

This principle of topography is also valid for the sanctuaries, as William Van Andringa demonstrates (Chapter 4). In Gaul, the great civic sanctuaries were no longer rebuilt after the crisis of the 3rd century. It was therefore the entire religious (and therefore civic) system that was modified from that time onwards. People no longer gathered periodically for local festivals financed by the *euergetes* and according to the city's calendar. Even if some major festivals may have survived (as in Carthage, according to Augustine), Van Andringa speaks of religion in pieces and of tailor-made religion, of cults organised in the context of small groups, in the home or within neighbourhood groupings. It is easy to see how, in such a landscape, one could recognise *this* pagan (a notable who insisted on respecting his ancestral cults)

or *these* pagans (the group gathered around the altar) but hardly any pagans as opposed to Christians.

We must therefore refrain from dividing the world into pagans and Christians, as Ine Jacobs makes clear at the outset and with good reason (Chapter 5). Jacobs focuses her attention on a pagan-mythological statuary group of Sagalassos (south-western Turkey) exhibited in the main street in the middle of the 6th century. Where in the last decades scholars have directed their attention to secular explanations, Jacobs shows that understanding the statues' positive power for self-identified Christians could help explain their omnipresence in the cityscape.

The archaeological data studied show that archaeological and literary sources do not necessarily combine but are expressed in different fields. The Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages studied by archaeology belong to the world of the concrete: the archaeological remains testify to what people did, how they adapted to specific historical and political situations that precipitated ancient societies into what we conventionally call the Middle Ages.

The texts studied in the rest of the volume therefore place us in a different field, that of the history of ideas, the ideas of being pagan and Christian in changing times and places. Being a Christian in late antique Gaul could mean different things than in early medieval Ireland, for example. In the literary traditions, these identities and ideas of Christianity or pre-Christian religions are constructed, negotiated and demarcated in various ways. Pagan and Christian self-definitions were far from fixed and stable, as the contributions on a wide range of texts from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages show. It emerges that religious identity was often regarded as problematic and was thematised especially when it came under challenge. What from a modern perspective seems straightforward, namely the distinction between Christian and non-Christian, dissolved into a multitude of self-definitions and attributions that were adapted to specific situations and served specific ends.

The complex nature of identities is exemplified by Christian communities that splintered into mutually hostile factions over theological arguments or different reactions to challenges from the imperial power. Elizabeth DePalma Digeser (Chapter 6) highlights these internal schisms within the Christian communities in her study of the Carthaginian and Alexandrian cases. She compares aspects of the Donatist and Arian controversies in Late Antiquity with a modern counterpart, the

treatment of Gertrude Van Tijn and Hannah Arendt after the Second World War. These case studies suggest that communities whose members perform multiple identities before persecution may split into hostile camps in the aftermath, if one side perceives the other as somehow compromised, as collaborating or corrupt. DePalma Digeser's study furthermore illustrates Éric Rebillard's (2012) argument in his book *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity* that people in Late Antiquity had multiple identities and that they did not in all situations rank their religious identity as primary.

One way of constructing identities is drawing lines between an in-group, 'us', and an out-group, 'them' – in this case Christians and pagans. Often pagans were denoted as barbarians, as the opposite of the civilised Christians, but in some cases the pagans could be presented in an idealised fashion as having wisdom of their own. Antti Lampinen (Chapter 7) explores the late antique and early medieval interactions between antiquarian literary (and para-literary) references to 'barbarian sages' and Christian identities. He examines the various outcomes, effects and ironies that writers could seek to achieve by operating with received group labels denoting wise men among barbarian peoples. Covering a wide range of diverse texts, the chapter also discusses the connections of these partly antiquarian ciphers of religious identity to the rhetorical and technical writing of the imperial era. Finally, it considers to what extent they shaped the form in which the figure of the 'barbarian sage' was transmitted to the Christian Middle Ages.

Humans are also bodily beings, and this material dimension of human existence bears relevance to the construction of identities as well. In early Christianity, there was a clear dualistic division between the mind and the body, and the ideal was the ascetical subjugation of the body to the will, thus striving towards the prelapsarian state of man. In the view of the ascetic Dorotheus of Gaza (6th century), Christian identity is beset by the experience of loss, because since Adam's fall, human existence has been riddled with unnatural passions which prevent the return to and reunion with God. The only way to regain one's own nature, that is, original identity, is habituation to a truly Christian, i.e. ascetic, life. Jan R. Stenger (Chapter 8) examines Dorotheus' rhetoric of healing against the backdrop of Stoic philosophy and ancient medical theorisation in order to show that he sets out a detailed programme for rebuilding Christian identity. Stenger argues that the med-

ical conceptualisation helps Dorotheus to shape the embodied ascetic self.

Ritual practices are a central aspect of religious life, and one that has often been taken to distinguish between pagans and Christians. Popular local practices like feasting at the graves of the saints have often been seen by late antique learned churchmen and modern scholars alike as remnants of paganism among the unlearned folk. Maijastina Kahlos (Chapter 9) questions this division in the light of the diversity of the late antique religious world. The emergence and spread of Christianity needs to be understood within the wider context of late antique religious landscape. The narrative of Christian triumph has led to the rituals and traditions of the folk religion being labelled as 'pagan survivals', but Kahlos questions this timeless primitivism and asks how the people involved in these practices themselves understood their nature and their religious identities. She seeks to analyse local religious worlds as presented by Christian authors, including Augustine of Hippo and Caesarius of Arles, in their different socio-political contexts. Kahlos furthermore highlights the importance of looking at the discourses within which the terminology referring to practices as superstitious or pagan arose and was used.

Identities are also tied to localities, and an important part of the process of conversion was the Christianisation of places. This involved not only the conversion of ritual sites and holy places or the abandonment of old sites and the founding of new ones, but also the mental work of transforming the past of localities and forming a new understanding of their location in relation to the important places of the Christian world. The places and their past were interconnected, and Christianising them was part of the process of identity construction involved in the process of religious change. Peter Brown has used the term 'micro-Christendoms', whereby universal Christianity was reconciled with the very localised world of the Early Middle Ages (Brown 2003, 15). The idea of Rome as the central place of the Church could be replicated on a local scale through transfer of relics, architecture and ecclesiastical customs, thus creating 'little Romes' on local soil.

Ireland was one of the first areas outside of the Roman empire to receive Christianity, and given its position as a remote island at the edge of the known world, Christianisation also meant tying together the past and present of the island with the Christian understanding of world history and the geography of the holy places. Elva Johnston

(Chapter 10) discusses the problems of distinguishing between pagans and Christians and the shaping of emerging Christian identities in late antique Ireland. When becoming Christians, the Irish did not abandon their old cultural traditions; rather, there was a dynamic process and accommodation between the old and the new. For the early medieval Irish Christians, the pagan past and their pagan ancestors were not something to be totally abandoned but something that could live on in their constructed literary traditions. Christianisation also involved the transformation of landscape and space to become Christian through the foundation of churches and Christian holy places. This process could include continuation and accommodation, as in the cases of holy wells being dedicated to Christian saints, but it also breaks with the past, as with the introduction of new ecclesiastical architecture with rectangular shapes that are strikingly different from the circular internal spaces of the round-houses and pre-Christian ritual sites.

Christianisation also meant changing one's perspective regarding one's location not only in space but also in time. Katja Ritari (Chapter 11) considers early medieval views on what it meant to be an Irish Christian and how early medieval Irish authors understood Ireland's location in time and space in regard to the providential history of God. By adopting a Christian worldview, one also relocated oneself and one's community in a teleological and eschatological perspective in relation to God's true reality awaiting in the afterlife. Some Irish Christians saw the conversion of Ireland as the fulfilment of the biblical promise that when Christianity has reached the ends of earth, the end will come, thereby locating the Christianity of their island at the outermost edges both in time and space. While geographically Ireland may have been peripheral, at least the learned elite of early medieval Ireland who authored our surviving sources had an international outlook and saw themselves as one of the Christian nations on the path to heaven. In their view, holiness could just as well be attained in Ireland as in Rome, and through their learning they were spiritually connected with the rest of Christendom.

With the coming of Christianity, Rome itself was also transformed and the pagan past had to be consolidated with the Christian present. Rosamond McKitterick (Chapter 12) discusses the city's dynamic relation to Late Antiquity revealed in the *Liber Pontificalis*. This narrative of the transformation of Rome from a pagan to a Christian city can be read as an attempt to frame a new identity for the Christians within

the narrative of the city's transformation. In this narrative, a common bond uniting Christians in Rome is formed around the figure of the bishop and common rituals enacted in an altered landscape of basilicas, thus building the foundations for a collective identity for the local Christian community.

Identities can be shifting and multifaceted. As outsiders we can assign collective identities to groups of people, but if we were able to ask those people themselves, they might see their identities differently. Hervé Inglebert questions in his Epilogue how we should think about ancient social membership and reminds us that there was no such term as 'collective identity' in ancient languages. One solution would be a lexical approach starting from the terms used to define different religious groups and the vocabulary of collective identification. Another approach would be to focus on acts denoting allegiance to some religious tradition instead of words. A third way would be the new hermeneutical model brought to the fore by Éric Rebillard focusing on individual multiple identities. Inglebert, however, contends that the notion of collective identities should not be abandoned and suggests a hermeneutical model based on (1) personal identity, (2) collective affiliations and (3) identification with the group. He analyses the diversity of discourses (lay, cleric, monastic and imperial) within the orthodox Christian community of Late Antiquity about what was correct and what was unacceptable practice. The analysis shows that these discourses served different functions, while only imperial power was in a position to create legal religious 'group identities' based on official definition. The social reality, however, was structured by a mix of these discourses, depending on local conditions, milieus and situations. These shifting frontiers of Christianity precluded a common definition of what was pagan, because 'being pagan' was mostly a Christian rhetorical argument of self-definition.

The contributions in this book are the result of the two-day symposium organised at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies on 3 and 4 November 2016. The idea of the symposium emerged from the enormous surge in studies on the construction and representation of identities, adopting theories and approaches from a wide range of disciplines within humanities over the past decades. In particular, scholars working on historical periods of transition have addressed this topic and focused on the ways in which collective and individual identities were negotiated amid processes of change. One prime

example is the period from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, in which Christianity spread from the Mediterranean to other regions of Europe and profoundly transformed the religious landscape. Although the definition and construction of Christian identities, as well as their interaction with other religious self-definitions, have attracted much interest, the scholarly discussion has often suffered from artificial boundaries – those between classical and medieval studies and those between archaeological, literary and historical approaches. This symposium was intended to overcome these boundaries by investigating religious identities and their interplay with other identities from the 4th to the 10th century CE, in order to understand more accurately both the recurring patterns and the changes in the emergence, negotiation and representation of images of selves and others over this period.

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