CHAPTER EIGHT

THE EMERGENCE OF IMPERIAL AND CATHOLIC ORDER

Elagabalus and Callistus:
A Monarchian Episcopate for an Imperial Monarchy

In A.D. 218, following the assassination of Caracalla the year before, Varius Avitus Bassianus as emperor assumed the title of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. He took the additional title of Elagabalus, the name of his favoured deity, and attempted to introduce into Rome the cult of Sol Invictus Elagabal, that is to say the cult of Sol Invictus in its specifically Syrian form, as the universal religion of the Empire. That attempt, characterised by the imposition of the specific ritual and priestly dress of the form of a cult that was alien to Roman culture, failed for that reason. It is important however to emphasise that it was not a failure of the process of syncretism itself, however much this might be suggested by the damnatio memoriae of Elagabalus himself, but the failure of a kind of fundamentalism in its own way inimical to such a syncretism.

Parallel with these events, we have, described in Pseudo-Hippolytus, Refutatio, IX, 6–13,2, an attempted religious reformation of the Roman community by Callistus, in which we have a movement towards monarchical episcopate accompanied by an advocacy of μοναρχία in the godhead. Callistus appeared to Tertullian as behaving like a pagan Pontifex Maximus in trying to become episcopus episcoporum.¹ In doing so he, as putative bishop of Rome, was but making similar claims to those of the emperor Elagabalus, as Pontifex Maximus of a syncretism that found its final expression in the Baal of Emesa as Sol Invictus. As a Monarchian theologian, he was looking for the ultimate principle in the godhead from which all lesser beings or persons were derived, just as Elagabalus could find that principle in Sol Invictus. Both emperor and putative pope were reflecting, in their own way,

¹ A. Brent, Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop, in Suppl. VCh. 31 (1995), pp. 511–512.
ideals of imperial unity in the societies over which they claimed to have the right to rule absolutely. We must now examine the relationship between these parallel events in the light of my thesis that the dynamic and parallel development of Imperial and Christian Order be understood dialectically and interactively in terms of a sociological theory of counter-culture.

Let us begin with Elagabalus and his place in the development of the Imperial Cult.

PART A. ELAGABALUS AND UNIVERSAL MONOTHEISM

We have seen in the case of Isis and Sarapis, and of the image of *Sol Invictus* with which that worship had been associated and whose iconography Septimius and Caracalla had also employed, a clear confluence and absorption of a polytheism into an ordered monotheism (7A 2.1–2.2). The worship of Cybele too had reflected similarly the divine imperial power (7A 1.2). Elagabalus, whose religious practices cannot be considered normative, did himself join the ranks of that priesthood, was castrated and infibulated, and placed the statue of *Magna Mater* in his own favoured sanctuary of the Baal of Emesa. But Antoninus Pius before him had introduced the *taurobolium* into her cult that was performed expressly *pro salute imperatoris* as well as on occasions *pro salute totius domus divinae*. We have already witnessed, even before the Severans, examples of the assimilation of cults formerly sanitised into the immediate circle of cults offered on behalf of the emperor (7A 1.2–1.2.1).

We witnessed a syncretistic process on the part of the early Imperial Cult in which other hitherto independent deities were assimilated with the worship of the emperor and related to this in a new way. One example of that process was to describe the various deified Virtues by the addition of variants of *augustus*, so that the divine Virtues became part of the collective personality of the emperor (2B 3). Another example was the reception of an emperor such as Hadrian into the cult of Dionysus so that he becomes a νέος Διόνυσος (6B 2), but more than simply an ordinary initiate. But what is new

---


3 *CIL* 8,8203.