



ROBERT MARKUS

# Robert Austin Markus

## 1924–2010

ROBERT MARKUS, who died on Wednesday, 8 December 2010, is known principally for his writings on St Augustine and the history of the early Church. While he wrote as a committed Christian, he always insisted that ecclesiastical history must be written with the same scientific objectivity as secular history, and that ecclesiastical developments can only be understood if they are fully related to changes in society as a whole.

Robert Markus was born on 4 October 1924 in Budapest. His father was director of a heavy engineering firm, which had been founded by Robert's grandfather Markus Lajos, who had started off as a locksmith. Robert's mother Lily, née Elek, came from a Jewish Hungarian family, living near Eszék, which became Osijek, in Croatia, after the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Her father was manager of an enormous forest. She was an internationally recognised ceramicist winning, amongst other distinctions, a Gold Medal at the 1937 Paris Exhibition. She continued her work in ceramics in England, adding other skills such as wood-carving, cloisonné-enamel work, tapestry-weaving and silver-smithing, until her death in 1962. For her art, she was drawn to Christian themes and, according to Robert's brother Tom, she was Catholic in spirit from an early age. Robert's father converted to Lutheranism as a young man, but amid growing anti-Semitism decided that this was no time for a Jew to leave his community, and so had himself readmitted to the synagogue.

The family came to England in 1939. Robert's father and his uncle Stephen were able to establish 'Ferrostatics', a small engineering works at Hollingworth, near Glossop in Derbyshire. They started off with four employees, making precision machine tools for the manufacture of Spitfires.

Because of this they were exempted from the general policy of sending 'enemy aliens'—including Hungarians—to the Isle of Man. The business grew rapidly under wartime conditions, and moved to larger premises, with more employees. After the war they continued with precision engineering for major industries, such as ICI. Eventually, as neither Robert nor his brother Thomas wished to enter Ferrostatics, and after Stephen, Robert's uncle, had left the firm (he died suddenly in the 1950s), Robert's father sold the business to Chloride Electrical Storage (makers of Exide car batteries) in the 1960s.

From 1939 to 1941 Robert was educated as a boarder at Kingsmoor School, Glossop, which he described as 'a Quaker type school'. He was happy there. He remembered that his main aim, apart from enjoying himself, had been to become thoroughly English and to conform in manners, appearance, language etc. He kept few memories of his childhood, of Hungary or of Hungarian. Although his political views remained left-wing, he continued to think that immigrants have some obligation to conform to the values and culture of their host society.

Robert spent the next eight years at the University of Manchester. He found that city an intellectual powerhouse, and it shaped his life. Robert's father wanted him to study engineering, as a preparation for entering the family firm. He himself wanted to study philosophy. So Robert's undergraduate course was a compromise: Chemistry. Michael Polanyi, a man of very wide interests, was Professor of Physical Chemistry. Robert's scientific training surely influenced his subsequent research in a totally different field. On graduating, Robert spent some time as a works-chemist in a CWS margarine factory under the wartime Essential Works Order. After the war Robert returned to his first choice, and went on to take an MA and a Ph.D. in philosophy, being supervised by Dorothy Emmet, to whom Robert thought that he owed more intellectually than to any other person. His MA, then still a research degree, was on Samuel Alexander, Manchester's most famous philosopher. The Ph.D. thesis was a discussion of some Cartesian presuppositions in late medieval and Renaissance philosophy. Postgraduate work resulted in Robert's first academic publications.<sup>1</sup>

Friends were always very important. At Manchester Robert was one of a close circle of friends united by radical socialist ideals. The circle included a student, later a teacher of history, called Margaret Bullen,

<sup>1</sup>'Alexander's philosophy: the emergence of qualities', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 11 (1950), 58–74; 'Method and metaphysics: the origin of some Cartesian presuppositions in the philosophy of the Renaissance', *Dominican Studies*, 2 (1949), 356–84.

whose father managed a Cooperative store in the Wirral. Walter Stein became a close friend who introduced Robert to the politics of radical protest. Another member of the group was John (Herbert) McCabe. Like Robert he had transferred from Chemistry to Philosophy, and again like Robert had become a student of Dorothy Emmet. McCabe came from a Catholic family, and was a most impressive personality. He combined strong left-wing views with a highly critical liberal Catholicism and went on to become a noted Dominican priest and theologian. Eric John, already a lecturer in medieval history, and both a Catholic and a socialist, was also a member of the circle.<sup>2</sup> The group was originally very secular. Walter Stein was a Marxist, but in time they all got seriously interested in Christianity. Robert joined university Catholic circles, and eventually the Union of Catholic Students. He decided to convert to Catholicism. According to his brother Thomas, Catholicism helped Robert to harmonise tensions between his inner personal life, his condition as an immigrant, and his social concerns and socialist politics. Fr Vincent Whelan instructed Robert, and in 1946 received him into the Catholic Church. Several others of the group, including Walter Stein, also became Catholics, as eventually also did Robert's parents and his brother Thomas.

Together with Walter Stein, Willy Schenk, Louis Allen and others, Robert founded the journal *Humanitas*, which brought together Catholic faith and a call for personal engagement in the cause of social reform. The journal advocated radical change not only in secular society but also in the Church. It was at the same time strictly non-violent. The journal took a very strong line against nuclear armaments. This was in the aftermath of the atomic bomb. Robert collaborated with Walter Stein in the writing of *Nuclear Warfare and the Christian Conscience*.<sup>3</sup> He went on several demonstrations, including marches to Aldermaston, and took part in TV discussions. He never quite lost this interest.<sup>4</sup> The ideas that motivated that group, and found expression in *Humanitas*, represented an English parallel to the liberal and socially conscious Catholicism which Eduard Mounier advocated in the journal *L'Esprit*, which he had founded in 1932. The

<sup>2</sup>They were later to collaborate in Eric John and R. A. Markus, *Papacy and Hierarchy* (London, 1969).

<sup>3</sup>'Conscience and deterrence', in W. Stein (ed.), *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience* (London, 1961), pp. 65–90.

<sup>4</sup>'Work and worker in early Christianity', in J. M. Todd (ed.), *Work: Christian Thought and Practice* (London, 1960), pp. 13–26. 'Christian perspectives on war and peace', in H. A. Haleem, O. Ramsbotham, S. Risaluddin and B. Wicker (eds.), *The Crescent and the Cross: Christian and Muslim Approaches to War and Peace* (London and New York, 1998), pp. 32–6.

French group was the left wing of an important Catholic intellectual revival between the two wars.<sup>5</sup> This revival eventually inspired also the very much more conservative Christian Democratic movement which was to shape Continental politics for several decades after the war, and worked for a European Union.

Fr Vincent Whelan remained a friend. In summer 1949 he and Robert went on a pilgrimage to Rome, for more than half the way on foot, armed with a Latin letter of recommendation from the Dominican provincial to clergy, monks, etc. on their way, who duly provided hospitality. As Robert recalled, 'Whelan was very liberal minded and represented a very liberally construed version of Roman Catholicism: He made me read Newman and Augustine. Pre-Vatican II Catholicism seen from inside was pretty horrifying to most of our circle, including me, brought up as we had been in a liberal tradition. Authoritarian, Rome-centred religion did not appeal: John XXIII and Vatican II were a kind of liberation from a Catholic intellectual ghetto.'<sup>6</sup> Much of Robert's subsequent academic work was concerned with the theme of a more diverse Church, in which Rome has less absolute authority, always in some fruitful tension with other Churches.

In 1949 Robert entered the noviciate of the Dominican order at Oxford, in the same year as John McCabe. His novice-master decreed that he was not to read any philosophy. This was to bring home to him that he was no longer a philosophy student.<sup>7</sup> He allowed him to read Augustine—provided he kept to the scriptural commentaries. Such intellectual narrowness was clearly not to Robert's taste. In due course he was to read every one of Augustine's writings. He more than once told John Moorhead how much he admired Jansenius, who had apparently done so ten times. Robert's academic publications dating from this period were still mainly philosophical, but he was getting interested in the history of the Church.<sup>8</sup> Some weeks before taking final vows he was visited by Margaret Bullen and decided that his future lay in marrying her, which he did in 1955. In

<sup>5</sup> Ph. Chenaux, *Entre Maurras et Maritain: une generation intellectuelle catholique, 1920–30* (Paris, 1999); M. Winock, *L'esprit: des intellectuels dans la cité, 1930–1950* (Paris, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> 'Papal infallibility, on the importance of not misunderstanding it after a hundred years', *Modern Churchman*, NS 13 (1970), 308–15.

<sup>7</sup> R. A. Markus, 'Evolving disciplinary contexts for the study of Augustine 1950–2000', *Augustinian Studies*, 3.2.2 (2001), 189–200, on pp. 189–90.

<sup>8</sup> See above, n. 1, also 'Facts, things and persons', *Hibbert Journal*, 48 (1950), 153–8 and 'Hume, reason and moral sense', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 13 (1952), 139–58; and Robert's earliest writings on Christian themes: 'Pleroma and Fulfilment: the significance of history in St Irenaeus' opposition to Gnosticism', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 8 (1954), 193–224; and 'A note on the meaning of *Via*', *Dominican Studies*, 7 (1954), 239–45.

the same year John (now Herbert) McCabe was ordained. From 1955 to 1974 Markus was at Liverpool, at first as a librarian. K. Povey, the university librarian, was a real scholar-librarian—one of the last of this breed, according to Robert—and he encouraged Robert to carry on with academic research.<sup>9</sup> In 1958 he was appointed to the Department of Medieval History, then headed by Christopher Brooke.<sup>10</sup> There he revealed his great gifts as a teacher. He had been assured that he would be able to keep up Patristic interests, and teach only a little run of the mill medieval history; in fact it turned out to be the reverse. To start with he was given little teaching, and that mainly tutorial, first individually, later to students in pairs. Happy days! He also lectured on Bede,<sup>11</sup> and on ancient and medieval political thought. Towards his students he was benevolent, and totally unauthoritarian. He did not impose knowledge, but helped pupils to recognise and work out problems by themselves. He was interested in education, and particularly in the place in education of theology.<sup>12</sup> According to John Moorhead, he was an ideal supervisor of postgraduates. Not only were all drafts speedily returned, but his comments, which tended to be on general issues rather than facts, were invariably spot-on.

A very strong Classics Department included Hilary Armstrong, who was particularly interested in Later Greek philosophy, especially Plotinus and neo-Platonism. He and Robert became friends and did some work together.<sup>13</sup> Robert became interested in Gregory the Great around 1960, when called on to offer a final year Special Subject (in those days usually two to four students, working intensively on original sources in the original

<sup>9</sup> His publications at that time included: 'The dialectic of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*', *Downside Review*, 73 (1955), 219–30; 'A relevant pattern of holiness: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Ethics"', *Hibbert Journal*, 55 (1957), 387–92; and his earliest paper on Augustine, 'St Augustine on signs', *Phronesis*, 2 (1957), 60–83.

<sup>10</sup> R. A. Markus, 'Christopher Brooke at Liverpool', in D. Abulafia, M. Franklin, M. Rubin (eds.), *Church and City 1000–1500: Essays in Honour of Christopher Brooke* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. xix–xxi.

<sup>11</sup> 'The chronology of the Gregorian mission to England: Bede's narrative and Gregory's correspondence', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 14 (1963), 16–30; and later *Bede and the Tradition of Ecclesiastical Historiography*, Jarrow Lecture 1975 (Jarrow on Tyne, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> R. A. Markus, 'The study of theology and the framework of secular disciplines', *Downside Review*, 78 (1960), 192–202; also 'Educational principles and university theology teaching', in L. Bright (ed.), *Theology in Modern Education: a Creative Encounter* (London, 1965), pp. 92–6.

<sup>13</sup> R. A. Markus and A. H. Armstrong, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* (London, 1960). R. A. Markus, 'Marius Victorinus and Augustine', in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), Part 5 of the *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 327–419; and 'The eclipse of a Neoplatonic theme: Augustine and Gregory the Great on visions and prophecies', in R. A. Markus and H. J. Blumenthal (eds.), *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A. H. Armstrong* (London, 1981), pp. 204–11.

language). One of the first students to take this course was (Sir) Ian Kershaw, who initially went on to lecture in medieval history at Manchester, before changing field to twentieth-century German history and making his name as biographer of Hitler. Robert's interest in Gregory lasted for the rest of his life. As Robert's research was in the field of early Christianity, and his teaching mainly on early medieval history, his interest became focused on the later Roman centuries, to the neglect of later periods. He was fascinated by the radical transformation of classical thought and culture during this period. How precisely, and why, was Gregory's world so different from that of Augustine? Robert thought that as his work developed he owed most intellectually to Henri-Iréné Marrou, whom he was to meet a few times later in his life, admired greatly, and read avidly.<sup>14</sup> From him he learnt the idea that 'Late Antiquity' was a period of history with a special character and identity of its own, which Marrou characterised most illuminatingly in his great book on Augustine.<sup>15</sup> Marrou had been a contributor to Mounier's *L'Esprit*. In his writings Robert encountered an altogether more serene version of liberal Catholicism, and one more respectful of traditions than that of his Manchester friends. In the early 1960s Robert got to know Peter Brown, just before the publication of Brown's *Augustine of Hippo* (London, 1967). Robert felt that he owed a great deal to Peter, and he was to dedicate his *End of Ancient Christianity* to Peter as 'to his teacher'. But according to Brown, the benefits of their friendship were mutual.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Peter Brown's gift is an intuitive response to what he reads, Robert's the working through of underlying structures of thought.<sup>17</sup>

A widening of Robert's field of interest resulted from his reading William Frend's *The Donatist Church*,<sup>18</sup> with its explanation of Donatism in terms of an analysis of the social structure of North African society. Frend argued that Donatism reflected the aspirations of the under-privileged, that is of the relatively un-Romanised and linguistically Berber population of North Africa. Against this analysis, Robert agreed with Peter Brown that the Donatists were defending pre-Constantinian, uncentralised traditions of the African Church against post-Constantinian centralisation. At the

<sup>14</sup>P. Riché, *Henri Iréné Marrou historien engagé* (Paris, 2003).

<sup>15</sup>H.-I. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris, 1938), supplemented by *Retractatio* (Paris, 1949).

<sup>16</sup>Peter Brown, 'Introducing Robert Markus', *Augustinian Studies*, 3.2 (2001), 186.

<sup>17</sup>I owe the comparison to John Moorhead.

<sup>18</sup>*The Donatist Church, a Movement of Protest in North Africa* (Oxford, 1952).

same time he showed that Augustine, the great proponent of Roman centralisation, shared a great deal of theological common ground with his opponents.<sup>19</sup> Donatist dissent, in Robert's view, centred on questions of authority and this for him was, as we have seen, a concern of high contemporary relevance.<sup>20</sup> Robert was a very different personality from Frennd in many ways, but the two men shared a sympathy for rebels against authority.

Robert was taking an ever deepening interest in the fascinating richness of the thought of Augustine, and Augustine is at the centre of *Saeculum*, Robert's first major book, which he dedicated to his wife.<sup>21</sup> It is essentially history of thought, but in this, as in all his writings, Robert is careful to interpret philosophical ideas in the light of the context in which they had been expressed. *Saeculum* is essentially an examination of the views on history, on the Roman state, and on the relationship of Church and secular society, which Augustine developed in his *City of God* (*De civitate dei*). Augustine wrote this book after Rome had been sacked by the Goths, and his immediate aim was to defend the Christian religion from the charge that it failed to save Rome from disaster. Augustine argued that in the Roman Empire, as indeed in every human society, the citizens of the 'City of God' and of the 'Earthly City' are inextricably intertwined. States are necessary because sinful man needs to be disciplined if peace and order are to prevail. But this necessary role does not give any state a privileged place in God's scheme of salvation. The role of states and their governments is theologically neutral. This fundamental truth has not been altered by the fact that the Roman state has become formally Christian. It remains an earthly state and therefore cannot expect the privilege of divine protection from its enemies. Rome's capture by the Goths does not therefore in any way discredit Christianity.

When Robert wrote *Saeculum* he focused on Augustine's positive, but theologically neutral, evaluation of secular society. He saw the key to Augustine's mature thought in the following passage:

<sup>19</sup>'Donatism: the last phase', in C. W. Dugmore and C. Duggan (eds.), *Studies in Church History*, 1 (London, 1964), pp. 118–26; also 'Reflections on religious dissent in North Africa in the Byzantine period', in G. J. Cuming (ed.), *Studies in Church History*, 3 (Leiden, 1966), pp. 140–9; and 'Christianity and dissent in Roman North Africa: changing perspectives', in D. Baker (ed.), *Studies in Church History*, 9, *The Church in Town and Countryside* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 1–15.

<sup>20</sup>'The crisis of authority in the Church: its historical roots', *Modern Churchman*, ns 10 (1967), 281–91.

<sup>21</sup>*Saeculum, History and Society in the Theology of Augustine* (Cambridge, 1970, rev. edn. 1988).



The heavenly city, while on its earthly pilgrimage calls forth its citizens from every nation and every tongue. It assembles a band of pilgrims, not caring about any diversity in customs, laws and institutions whereby they severally make provision for the achievements and maintenance of earthly peace. All these provisions are intended, in their various ways, among the different nations, to secure the aim of earthly peace. The heavenly city does not repeal or abolish any of them, provided that they do not impede the religion in which the one supreme and true god is worshipped.<sup>22</sup>

The last sentence is of course open to a wide range of interpretation, and it was indeed to be interpreted in increasingly restrictive ways. Augustine himself was to become an advocate of religious coercion. Robert acknowledged a tension between Augustine's views on coercion and his views on the autonomy of the civil community, a tension which he even then thought might prove irresolvable.<sup>23</sup> Later, looking back on his life's work, Robert decided that his interpretation of Augustine in *Saeculum* had been one-sided.<sup>24</sup> He had been inclined to see Augustine as one of the founding fathers of a Christian tradition of secularity.<sup>25</sup> His interpretation of Augustine's views had come perilously close to making him a precursor of modern liberalism, reflecting an intellectual tendency of those years, when the influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, with their emphasis on the 'adulthood of the world', was giving a wide currency to theological attempts to construct a secular theology, or 'religionless Christianity', and to portray secularisation as representing a crucial strand in Christianity itself.<sup>26</sup> This criticism had already been made by M. J. Holerich, who found that Robert's interpretation of Augustine's view of the secular seemed to have been drawn entirely in terms derived from modern individualist Liberalism, in which the state is founded on contract and consent, and lacks any transcendental legitimation, a state which must necessarily be secular, open, pluralistic, and religiously neutral—'freedom plus groceries'.<sup>27</sup> Robert accepted that *Saeculum* reflects the intellectual atmosphere in which it was written, an anxiety about the attitude to be taken by the Christian Church to a society in which Christians were becoming a minority. Returning to this topic in *Christianity*

<sup>22</sup> *The City of God*, 19.17 cited *Saeculum* p. 40

<sup>23</sup> *Saeculum*, p. 66, n. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Robert has provided us with a review of his life's work in the lectures published as *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1–3; D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethgel, tr. Neville Horton Smith (London, 1953).

<sup>27</sup> *Christianity and the Secular*, p. 51.

*and the Secular*, Robert notes that Maritain had proposed a democratic secular faith which the Church is to advocate in common with non-Christians in public, while it, and each other group, in the semi-privacy of their educational establishments, gives different reasons for it.<sup>28</sup> Robert takes Maritain to mean that the Church proclaims its message to all, but feels morally bound to uphold the consensus on which civilised public order is built, a view with which he agrees.

In his next book Robert carries his examination of the attitude of the Church to secular society into the early history of the Church. *Christianity in the Roman World* traces how Christianity became respectable by adopting large elements of classical culture, and came to accept more and more of the secular realities of the Roman world.<sup>29</sup> Previously hated as the religion of a suspect and outlandish minority, Christianity lost this character in the third century, and could become the religion of emperor and empire. Robert thought that this 'success' created serious new problems for the Church: 'After Constantine the catholic Church lost its link with the past, and had to annex its claim to the past from more plausible claimants like the Donatists. The cult of the martyrs, the ecclesiastical histories, and the ascetic movement were the Church's chief devices for reconciling itself to living in a world which it had assimilated, that is to recreate an identity.'<sup>30</sup>

By now Robert had established an international reputation as a historian of the early Church. In 1974 he was appointed to the Chair of Medieval History at Nottingham. Here he proved an inspiring teacher of both undergraduates and postgraduates. His door was always open to students who had difficulties. To some he offered guidance which changed their lives. He encouraged medievalists from all parts of the university to meet together regularly and discuss their research. As an academic politician he was an effective champion of the humanities. It was largely thanks to him that the Nottingham Department of Classics survived these years of financial stringency to become the thriving academic department that it is today. Meanwhile he continued to think about the Early Church. The question of the Church's relationship with secular society which had long preoccupied Robert is closely related to the Church's view of its essential nature. Post-war scholarship had been preoccupied with the question of

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 68, citing Maritain's *Man and State* (Chicago, 1951), chap. 5.

<sup>29</sup> R. A. Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World* (London, 1974).

<sup>30</sup> *Christianity and the Secular*, p. 33; cf. *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 24-5.

how it came about that the Christians felt so strongly that they were a distinct group, who had no choice but to reject the religious practices of the rest of society. Was there a unified concept of orthodoxy among the earliest Christian communities?<sup>31</sup> And if, as some have suggested, the earliest teaching did not have the distinction of orthodoxy and heresy, how did this distinction arise? The early history of Christianity, or Christianities, the process involving the creation of hierarchical organisation, definition of doctrine, and the establishment of a canon of sacred writings, is treated by Robert in a stimulating, if not perhaps altogether convincing, paper, as a process of progressive self-definition, the purpose of which was to enable men to recognise the Church, rather than to establish its true doctrine.<sup>32</sup>

In 1982, when it seemed that the University of Nottingham would be forced to make redundancies, Robert took voluntary early retirement, though he continued to do some teaching for a further three years. Retirement proved extremely productive.

He had long intended to write a book on Gregory the Great (540–604). He was struck by the fact that the world of Gregory, and therefore also his problems and his thoughts, were totally different from those of Augustine. So before getting on to the great Pope he felt he had to understand exactly how and why the world, and man's understanding of it, had changed so completely.<sup>33</sup> His efforts to reach that understanding resulted in what is probably his masterpiece, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, published in 1990. What Robert came to see as the decisive difference between the age of Augustine and that of Gregory the Great was a change in the nature of Christianity, a contraction in the scope that Christianity, or rather its clerics, allowed to the secular, to the theologically neutral.<sup>34</sup> Robert's book once again starts with Augustine, and his position in the then current controversy about how a Christian should live. Many were feeling the power of the ascetic ideal, and its call to opt out of everyday life, marriage, and property, and to adopt a life entirely based on the New Testament and Christian perfection. Augustine, like other highly educated young contemporaries, had given up a secular profession and marriage to devote himself first to a life of contemplation, and eventually to the service of the Church. But he came to believe that perfection could never be achieved in

<sup>31</sup> W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, English Translation (London, 1927).

<sup>32</sup> 'The problem of self-definition: from sect to church', in E. P. Sanders (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition, Volume 1, The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries* (London, 1980), pp. 1–15 and 217–19.

<sup>33</sup> *The End of Ancient Christianity*, p. xi.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

this world, it could only be achieved in the Kingdom. A person could lead a normal life and be a good Christian, as long as he or she was always aware of inherent sin and striving to overcome it. Robert gives a sensitive account of the argument of the advocates of Christian perfection, as well as of Augustine's intellectual struggle with the problem, and the position he finally reached.

There was controversy not only about how men and women should live, but also about the ordering of the social life, the Christianisation of time and place. The progress of the Roman year was marked out by traditional festivals, which had originally been intimately linked to the worship of pagan gods. By the end of the fourth century unambiguously pagan ritual had been largely abandoned, and Christians as well as the remaining pagans enjoyed the occasion simply as public entertainment. By this time there already existed a parallel cycle of Christian festivals: Sundays, Easter, Whitsun and last of all Christmas, and an increasing number of commemorations of martyrs. Now clerics, but also a significant number of laymen, found the pagan survivals represented by the old festivals intolerable. Robert describes the end of the traditional shows in Augustine's Africa, and somewhat later in Rome. Public worship at temples had long ceased. They were now being destroyed, or at least allowed to fall into decay. At the same time the bones of martyrs together with their cult were introduced into cities, where they offered the citizens a Christian medium of communication with Heaven, as well as linking living Christians to the glorious dead of the age of persecutions.

At the same time the ascetic movement was being tamed and directed into the service of the Church, among others by Augustine himself, but perhaps achieving its widest impact in the West through the writings of John Cassian, which were immensely influential in Gaul. Cassian purported to acquaint his readers with Egyptian asceticism but, as Robert shows, with Egyptian asceticism in a significantly modified form. The emphasis was no longer on extremes of austerity, but on communal life, regular ritual and above all the study of the scriptures: 'The image of the monastic community was becoming adapted to making it a model for the Christian community in the world, while the ascetic ideal it proposed to its members was becoming adapted to serve as the model for bishops and clergymen. The stage was set for the wholesale invasion of the Gallic Church by ascetics, and by their ideas of the Christian view of the world, the flesh and the devil.'<sup>35</sup> Monasteries became the nurseries of bishops

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 197–8: 'the ascetic ideology had moved from the fringes of society to its centre'.

who preached monastic ideas to the laity, and their preaching was all the more influential because many of them belonged to the old ruling class, which in Gaul retained property and influence under the Visigothic and Frankish kings. In Italy the development was rather different, but the eventual result was the same. The monastic movement spread more slowly, and there were fewer aristocratic bishops. But in the middle of the sixth century Justinian's Gothic wars followed by the Lombard invasion and settlement did tremendous damage to the social fabric of Italy. The social and above all the economic bases of the traditional secular culture were destroyed. Cassiodorus lived through these calamities and tried to salvage for the monks of his Vivarium as much of the traditional literary culture as he thought his monks needed for the understanding of the Bible and authoritative patristic texts.

The cumulative effect of all this was enormous. In the two centuries dealt with in this book, and particularly in the second half of the sixth century, the western provinces were being drained of the secular, that is of that sector of life which is not considered of direct religious significance. Above all secular education and culture were running down. Robert sums up the transformation: 'Christian culture in the early medieval centuries became radically and essentially biblical in a way it had not been before. The heterogeneity which had characterised it, at any rate from Augustine to Boethius, and had provided it with a fruitful play of internal tensions for its enrichment and growth had gone; but a good deal of secular learning could, and sometimes did, continue to play an important part within it.'<sup>36</sup>

When he had published *The End of Ancient Christianity* Robert was at last ready to write his book on Pope Gregory I, in which he would describe the life and work of this famous Pope in this transformed world.<sup>37</sup> He records that the whole book was read in typescript by Margaret Markus, and that it owes many improvements to her labours. The title describes exactly what the book is about. According to Robert, we live in two worlds, the material world and the world of imagination, perception and ideas. The two worlds are ever interacting, and Robert has set out to show the two worlds and their interaction in the case of Pope Gregory. He has drawn a very great personality, above all a dedicated pastor, but also a first rate administrator and leader. His culture is the ascetic, bible-based culture whose development Robert has traced in his previous book. Gregory upheld the value of secular disciplines, but in unambiguous subordination

<sup>36</sup> *The End of Ancient Christianity*, p. 225.

<sup>37</sup> *Gregory the Great and his World* (Cambridge, 1997).

to scriptural learning, and only to the extent that they promote scriptural understanding. This had also been Augustine's position in *De doctrina Christiana*, but with the difference that in Augustine's world secular education was flourishing and independent of what bishops said about it.<sup>38</sup> For Gregory to understand the scripture is to be renewed through their power. Gregory believed that scripture could be understood both historically and allegorically. While allegory could express both doctrine and moral teaching, Gregory in practice favoured moral interpretations.<sup>39</sup> Gregory's attitude to allegory was more unquestioning than that of Augustine, revealing the cultural shift that separates the two men. Augustine had been aware that there was a problem about understanding allegories and signs. For Gregory there was no doubt. They are transparent without any need to question.<sup>40</sup>

Gregory's world is the chaotic post-Roman world. He strove hard to do his best for his congregation, but he also had to supervise the administration of the estates which provide the resources for the Church's much needed charitable work. The senate and secular administration of Rome had disappeared so that the Pope had to look after the material as well as the spiritual welfare of its citizens. At the same time the Lombards were a permanent threat, which the Pope had to ward off through his own diplomacy, or by getting the Byzantine exarch at Ravenna to take military action, something which that official was often reluctant to do. Gregory coped heroically.

At the same time Robert shows that Gregory should not be considered the founder of the medieval papacy, and that he had little impact on the development of the papacy as an institution. In Gregory's time the Roman Church was still very much part of the imperial system as established by Justinian.<sup>41</sup> He still relied on Roman order, and legality, and, perhaps over-optimistically, on the Roman army. His sending of Augustine to convert the Anglo-Saxons eventually proved to be an act of far-reaching importance, but his initiative at mission was not immediately continued. He consolidated Roman leadership of the Churches in Byzantine Italy, but the Churches in Lombard Italy refused to accept the condemnation of the Three Chapters,<sup>42</sup> and came to constitute what was practically a Church of

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40–1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41–5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49, see also *Christianity and the Secular*, p. 87.

<sup>41</sup> *Gregory the Great and his World*, pp. 203–4.

<sup>42</sup> See the Introduction and Epilogue which Robert wrote jointly with Claire Sotinel to C. Chazelle and C. Cubitt (eds.), *The Crisis of the Oikoumene, the Three Chapters and the Failed Quest for*

the Lombard kingdom. The see of Ravenna, because that city was the centre of Byzantine administration, resisted Roman jurisdiction. At the same time the African Churches, while recognising the seniority of the Roman Church, insisted on maintaining their own traditions, and were not prepared to take directions from Rome. It was only after North Africa had been conquered by the Arabs, that 'no longer enriched by the creative tensions between a number of great sees ringing the Mediterranean, cut off from Africa and gradually from the Eastern churches, the Roman Church became the unchallenged mistress and teacher of the Western Germanic nations'.<sup>43</sup>

A course of lectures Robert gave during a semester as visitor at Notre Dame University gave him an opportunity to survey his life's academic work and to relate it to his own philosophical concerns and to those of contemporary theology and including a certain amount of revision or, to use Augustine's title, *retractatio*.<sup>44</sup> At the time of his death he was rereading the works of Gregory, and revising his book in the light of his rereading.

Robert was President of the Ecclesiastical History Society in 1978–9. He spent 1986–7 at the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies. He was Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Catholic University of America in 1988, and Visiting Professor at Notre Dame University in 1993. Robert was President of the International Association of Patristic Studies 1991–5. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1984, and was awarded the OBE in 2000 for services to ecclesiastical history.

As we have seen Robert Markus was very much concerned with the problem of the place of Christianity, and particularly of the Catholic community, in relation to a multicultural society. He felt that the Church while remaining itself must be open to society, share its concerns, and be ready to discuss them. Another aspect of his thinking, and one which is perhaps less fashionable now, is the belief that in this discussion the Church could draw strength from an understanding of its history and historical texts.<sup>45</sup> Robert's historical studies cover a period of transformation, in the opposite direction to that which was happening in his life-time. In the age of Augustine Christians lived in a world in which the pagan

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*Unity in the Sixth Century Mediterranean* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 1–14 and 265–78, perhaps Robert's last publication.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>44</sup> *Christianity and the Secular*, Blessed Pope John XXIII lecture series in Theology and Culture (Notre Dame, IN, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. W. E. Klingshirn and M. Vessey (eds.), *The Limits of Ancient Christianity* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999), p. vii.

culture of the classical world, with its rich variety of traditions, was still fully alive. Augustine engaged in dialogue with a culture which was largely pre-Christian. Roughly two hundred years later, Pope Gregory the Great could assume that everybody who mattered was Christian. The Church now inhabited a culture to a large and ever growing extent of its own making. When he read Augustine, Robert Markus might be said to have gone in search of Christian traditions which did not try to shape, or at least could not hope to shape, surrounding society, and which had a legitimate place for the autonomy of the secular.

Robert Markus's work drew on learning in a very wide field, philosophy, theology, and of course history, both ancient and modern. He was widely read in literature. He was an acute critic of music. Robert and Margaret were an extraordinarily hospitable couple. There were private areas. Visitors remember his pipe and his quiet humour. He was always ready to share his learning, and to give a great deal of his own time to help colleagues with their research. Robert was kind and enormously helpful to his postgraduates. His books have made their impact. But Robert Markus was perhaps most influential through his conversation. His affability and modesty and his warm approachable manner enabled him to assist and inspire very many young scholars at Liverpool and at Nottingham, and in fact all over the world. Robert Markus is survived by his wife and three children.

J. H. W. G. LIEBESCHUETZ

*Fellow of the Academy*

*Note.* In preparing this memoir I have been greatly assisted by the 'Notes for Obituarist' that Robert deposited with the Academy. Professor Thomas Markus, Robert's brother, provided information supplementing those notes. I am also indebted for help to Professor Bernard Hamilton, Professor John Moorhead, Professor Jean Porter, Professor Stephen Hodkinson, and Father Mark Brentnall.

A bibliography of Robert's writings between 1949 and 1998 is in W. E. Klinshirn and M. Vessey (eds.), *The Limits of Ancient Christianity, Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999), pp. xv–xxv. Robert's most important essays are collected in: *From Augustine to Gregory the Great, History and Christianity in Late Antiquity* (London, 1983), *Sacred and Secular: Studies on Augustine and Latin Christianity* (Aldershot, 1993), and *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool, 1996).



