

Christianity and the Roman Empire

Within a few hundred years, the small, often hated religious movement called Christianity became the dominant religion of Europe and the Western world. By becoming the state religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity became the largest and most influential religion in the world. Scholars still debate why and how this occurred, but it is clear that it was one of the most important transformations in history.

The Growth of Early Christianity

Christianity was spread through the Roman Empire by the early followers of Jesus. Although saints Peter and Paul are said to have established the church in Rome, most of the early Christian communities were in the east: Alexandria in Egypt, as well as Antioch and Jerusalem. Christianity gained adherents among both Jews and non-Jews, bringing them together with a message of unity before God.

Because Christianity was so diffuse, and also illegal and therefore kept underground, it is hard to speak of a united “Christianity” in this period. A more accurate statement might be that there were “Christianities,” that is, various forms of Christianity, with different takes on the religion and its message. Gnostics, Montanists, Docetists, and others, debated about the true nature of Christ, salvation, and the life of a Christian. Still, several important Christian writers, called Fathers of the Church—men such as Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Clement of Rome—helped define, in a broad sense, the doctrines of Christianity as they would be recognized in the future. Their writings also helped sway people to adopt Christianity. They were mostly opposed by the Roman authorities, who sought to suppress Christianity.

Why Were Christians Persecuted?

The idea of a mystery religion that offered salvation to its initiates was not alien to the Romans. Several such religions, like the Cult of Isis and Mithraism, were imported to the Roman world. Most were tolerated, though some were suppressed—like the Cult of Bacchus, because it involved sexual rites.

The Christian religion, however, was largely unacceptable to conservative Romans of the time. The Romans were a religious people, but many saw Christianity as a threat to their religious system. Unlike members of other new religions, Christians refused to sacrifice to the gods, proclaiming instead that there was only one God. Pagan Romans were not only offended by this, but also felt it threatened their society. They believed that society was protected by the *pax deorum*: the peace, or agreement, with the gods. The gods protected cities, towns, and empires in exchange for sacrifice and worship. Since Christians refused to do these things, the pagans believed that the Christians endangered themselves and everyone around them.

In addition, because Christians refused to worship or sacrifice to the emperor, they were suspected of treason. Christians held that the emperor was only a man, and that worship had to be reserved for God and Christ, but to pagans and representatives of the Roman state this seemed very suspicious. This was not helped by the fact that Christians

gathered together for church services and excluded non-Christians from such services. These services seemed like secret meetings held by possible traitors. Many rumors spread about Christians. They were accused, perhaps due to garbled understandings of the Eucharist, of being cannibals. Early Christians celebrated the *agape*, a “love feast.” While such feasts celebrated brotherly and sisterly love among all members of the church, rumors spread that the Christians were practicing open sex and incest.

History of Persecutions of Christians

Nonetheless, most emperors preferred to turn a blind eye toward Christianity. If Christians stirred up trouble, especially by publicly refusing to worship the gods, they would be punished, but for the most part, emperors and their officials had much more important matters occupying their time.

There were of course sporadic persecutions. The first took place very early on in Rome, in 64 AD, when Emperor Nero cracked down on the Christians of the city. He had some Christians thrown to the beasts, and he had others burned alive— some, supposedly, in his garden, to act as torches at night. But Nero seems to have been using the Christians as scapegoats for the Great Fire of Rome, which consumed much of the city, and which the populace suspected Nero of having started.

For the next century or so, persecutions of Christians were sporadic and fairly rare. When Pliny the Younger, a Roman author and magistrate, toured the eastern provinces for Emperor Trajan and asked how to deal with Christians, the emperor advised him not to seek out Christians, but only to punish those who stand accused by their neighbors based on hard evidence. Some Christians were executed, but rooting out Christianity was not a major concern of the state. Some persecution also probably happened on the local level in times of hardship or disaster, when the Christian refusal to sacrifice to the gods made them easy scapegoats.

In the third century, as the Roman Empire entered a period of crisis, persecution of Christians intensified. Barbarians broke through the borders of the empire, plague ravaged the cities, and the Roman economy went into a sharp decline. This period also saw a rapid turnover of emperors, as political instability, civil war, and bloody battles resulted in the death of many emperors before they had a chance to rule for very long. Some of the short-lived emperors in this period were friendly toward Christianity. Philip the Arab, for example, seems to have been interested in the religion and corresponded with Christian intellectuals. His successor, Decius, however, was far less tolerant. Blaming the catastrophes afflicting the empire on Christianity, Decius instituted the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. In 250 AD, Decius required all citizens of the empire to sacrifice to the emperor, and receive a certificate to prove that they had done this. Those without a certificate could be executed. Decius' persecution was short lived, however, and failed to stamp out Christianity.

The Crisis of the Third Century came to an end with the reign of Emperor Diocletian, who reorganized and strengthened the empire by creating the *tetrarchy*, a system of four ruling emperors. Diocletian and one of his tetrarchs, Galerius, agreed to persecute Christians, because part of their project of reunifying the empire involved uniting all Romans behind a shared belief in the old gods. This persecution—often called The Great Persecution—began in 303 AD. Several thousand Christians were killed, including many

Christian leaders. This was one of the most trying times for Christianity, but the religion was able to survive and eventually triumph.

Reasons for Christianity's Growth

Since Christians were increasingly persecuted by the state, and ostracized by their pagan neighbors for not worshipping the gods, it is difficult to understand how the religion became dominant in the Roman Empire. There are a number of factors to account for the growing popularity of Christianity in the Roman Empire, though it is hard to tell which factors were the most important. First, of course, is genuine faith and conviction. Many seem to have been genuinely attracted to Christianity's message of salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life.

At the same time, the era of the early church, especially the third century, was a time of chaos and upheaval. The same events that led some to blame Christianity for disaster may have encouraged others to accept Christianity. As plague and barbarian invasions made life short and uncertain, the promises of Christianity may have seemed particularly appealing. In addition, Christians seem to have taken better care of the sick, especially plague victims, whom others avoided out of concern for their own health. This altruism may have encouraged converts, especially among those who were successfully healed. Christians also showed great generosity to the poor, who were largely overlooked by the Roman state. Many of the poor probably became very loyal to Christianity because of the support they received from Christians.

Indeed, the Christian message of faith, charity, and equality before God likely appealed to the dispossessed in Roman society. The second-century pagan writer Celsus criticized Christianity for being a religion of women, slaves, and children. Women, in particular, were given status in the early church that they did not usually enjoy in ancient society, and in many regards they were treated as equals of men. Women could serve as deaconesses, and Christianity seems to have been particularly popular among women. Since women tended to do the majority of the child rearing in ancient households, the popularity of Christianity among women may have led to it being passed on to future generations.

Another important factor in the spread of Christianity may have been the persecutions themselves. Christians often made spectacles of their unwillingness to worship the gods in public trials, and used these events to voice Christian doctrine. When they were sentenced to be executed, the Christians faced their deaths with fearless resolve, which may have provided an example to the populace of the power of the faith and the conviction of its adherents.

One of the most famous accounts of martyrdom is that of Perpetua, who was killed in the late second century. She was a young Roman noblewoman and nursing mother who wrote down an account of her arrest and imprisonment, which describes her father's visits to the prison and his pleas for her to renounce her faith so as to be spared, her dreams of battling the devil in the amphitheatre and winning a crown from God, and a vision of her deceased brother in heaven. A final section, written by someone else, records how Perpetua and her slave Felicity, who had also recently given birth, were thrown to the beasts, survived, and ultimately killed by the sword. Perpetua supposedly helped guide the trembling hand of

the executioner to her own neck. This vivid display of her contempt for death and her expectation of eternal reward would not only have affected those watching at the amphitheatre—it was also spread in written form for potential converts to read and to become inspired.

Constantine and Christianity

Despite its growing popularity, Christianity may never have become the dominant religion of the Roman Empire had it not eventually found imperial support. Under Emperor Constantine the Great, Christianity went from a persecuted faith to the most important religion in the Roman Empire. Constantine's support for Christianity was slow in its development, and far from a predictable occurrence.

Constantine came to power when a series of civil wars at the beginning of the fourth century destroyed the tetrarchy established by Diocletian. The system fell apart as each of the four emperors battled the others for control. In the western half of the empire, Constantine battled a rival, Maxentius, for Rome. In 312 AD, shortly before Constantine's army marched against the much larger force of Maxentius, Constantine supposedly had a vision. He is said to have seen a cross in the sky, and a message written out: *In Hoc Signo Vinces*, "In this sign, you will conquer." Later, he had a dream in which he was told to put the *labarum* (or *Chi Rho*, an overlapping XP, which were the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek) on the shields of his soldiers. He did so, and his soldiers triumphed against Maxentius in a battle at the Milvian Bridge outside Rome.

Believing that he had been helped by the intervention of Christ, in 313 AD Constantine met with Licinius—the eastern emperor—at Milan, and there they issued the Edict of Milan. The Edict of Milan made Christianity legal, removed all restrictions on Christian worship, and returned all property confiscated from the Church during the Great Persecution. Licinius eventually reneged on the Edict of Milan as he came into conflict with Constantine over control of the empire. In another war, Constantine defeated Licinius, which reaffirmed his belief that the Christian God was on his side, and allowed him to legalize Christianity throughout the empire. He built a new capital city in the east, Constantinople, filled with churches and dedicated to the Christian God.

Scholars continue to debate the extent and nature of Constantine's Christianity. As emperor, he legalized Christianity, he sponsored the construction of new churches, promoted Christians to high offices in the government, and gave special rights, such as tax exemptions, to the Christian clergy. At the same time, however, he issued coins with images of pagan gods, and the statue of him at Constantinople depicted him as the sun god. It seems that Constantine's Christianity changed over the course of his life as he became more knowledgeable about the religion. His mother Helena may have been a Christian since he was a child, and therefore imparted information on the faith to Constantine. However, even after his vision at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine may have wanted to worship Christ along with other gods. To someone brought up in the world of traditional Roman religion, Christ could be worshipped equally with the other gods, or the Christian god could even be considered the supreme God, while the other gods would still have been worshipped as lesser gods. Nonetheless, it seems that Constantine, as time went on, took a stricter and

stricter view that there was but one God, the Christian God. Eventually he patronized only Christianity.

But even as Constantine legalized and sponsored Christianity, he faced difficulties. As we know, in the period of the early church there was no singular Christianity, but several Christianities with different beliefs and traditions. As Constantine tried to create a universal, empire-wide church, he found that there was a great deal of debate over Christian beliefs. In Africa, for example, a group of Christians called the Donatists split off from the main church because many of the bishops had denied their faith during the Great Persecution, and the Donatists refused to follow the lapsed clergy. They would clash with the official church in Africa for decades to come.

More serious was a doctrinal dispute that started in Egypt, but soon spread far and wide. The dispute was over the true nature of Christ. The bishop of Alexandria had said that Christ was God, while one of his priests, named Arius, disagreed, claiming that Christ was similar to but different from God, and that Christ was a creation of God. Priests and bishops debated the issue, and soon laypeople became involved as well. Riots and street fighting broke out in several cities over what became known as the Arian Controversy (after the priest Arius). In 325 AD, Constantine called the First Ecumenical Council, an empire-wide meeting of bishops, to resolve the issue. Constantine presided over the council, calling himself the bishop of all things outside the church. This council took place in the city of Nicaea, and declared that the doctrine of Arius was a heresy. Nicene Christianity, as defined at the council, held that Christ and God were equal and of the same substance. This was declared the orthodox, or true, belief.

Constantine died in 337 AD. He was only officially baptized on his deathbed. This was probably because he waited to be baptized until the last minute so that as many sins as possible would be wiped clean. After his death, he was buried at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, and in his tomb he was represented as the Thirteenth Apostle.

Christianity and the Empire after Constantine

Christianity continued to spread within the Roman Empire after the death of Constantine, but it still faced difficulty and conflict. Though the Council of Nicaea was supposed to solve the Arian Controversy, the theological debates continued. Arianism remained a powerful force within the Roman Empire until the end of the fourth century, in part because several of Constantine's successors, including his son Constantius II, supported Arianism.

Constantine's nephew, Julian, succeeded Constantius II. He was secretly a pagan, and hostile toward Christianity. Once he became emperor, he made his pagan beliefs public and tried to return the empire to paganism. His attempt was short lived, however, as he was killed in battle and replaced by a Christian general. There would never be another pagan emperor. Christianity slowly became the dominant religion and cultural force in the Roman Empire.

In 379 AD, Emperor Valens, an Arian, was killed in battle against invading Goths, and he was succeeded by Theodosius, a Roman general. Theodosius was a firm believer in the Council of Nicaea, and he set out on a policy of spreading Nicene Christianity throughout the empire. He cracked down on Arianism, and passed severe laws against all Christian sects

he deemed heretical. He made Nicene Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. He also closed pagan temples, and passed laws against celebrating pagan rites (though many of these pagan rites may already have become relics of the past). By the time of Emperor Theodosius' death in 395, Christianity had truly triumphed, and the Roman Empire, once hostile towards the religion, had become a thoroughly Christian state. Even as the Roman Empire collapsed, its Christian legacy would live on, as Christianity remained central to European culture.

Summary:

- Christianity spread throughout the Roman world, especially the eastern Mediterranean, in the years after the death of Christ. Because Christian communities were spread out, in sporadic contact, and forced underground by the Roman state, many forms of Christianity flourished in different areas.
- The Romans persecuted Christianity because they felt that the Christians endangered their cities and the whole Roman state by refusing to give the gods their sacrifices. They also feared that the Christians were traitors, since they did not worship the emperor and met in secret. There were also a variety of rumors about strange Christian behavior.
- Besides the persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero in 64 AD, the Roman state only persecuted Christians sporadically for a long time. By the third century, as disasters befell the empire and Christians were blamed for not sacrificing to the gods, persecutions became harsher and more common, until they reached a height with The Great Persecution, under Diocletian.
- Despite the persecution, many found the Christian message appealing. To some, it offered hope in a bleak and violent time, and Christian charity may have caused others to embrace the religion. Christianity seems to have appealed especially to the poor and women, and was also spread through the spectacle of martyrdom.
- Emperor Constantine, after a dream and a vision before the Battle of Milvian Bridge, slowly adopted Christianity. He legalized the faith with the Edict of Milan, issued in 313 AD, and patronized the religion, sponsoring the construction of churches, promoting Christians to high offices in the government, and giving special rights, such as tax exemptions, to the Christian clergy.
- Constantine's efforts to create a universal church were hampered by disagreements over Christian belief. He tried to settle the most severe disagreement, the Arian Controversy, at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, which created a definition of Nicene Christianity, but the controversy continued to rage for the rest of the century.
- Christianity became more established within the Roman Empire after the death of Constantine, and under Emperor Theodosius I, Nicene Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, while Arianism, other heresies, and paganism were suppressed.