Christianity and the Roman Empire

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In the space of a few hundred years, a small, often brutally persecuted cult rose to become the dominant religion of the West. How did it happen?

Beginnings of persecution

The story of Christianity’s rise to prominence is a remarkable one, but the traditional story of its progression from a tiny, persecuted religion to the established religion in the medieval West needs some debunking. Although in the first few centuries AD Christians were prosecuted and punished, often with death, there were also periods when they were more secure. Secondly, the rise of Christianity to imperial-sponsored dominance in the fourth and fifth centuries, although surprising, was not without precedent, and its spread hardly as inexorable as contemporary Christians portrayed it.

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Christians were first, and horribly, targeted for persecution as a group by the emperor Nero in 64 AD. A colossal fire broke out at Rome, and destroyed much of the city. Rumours abounded that Nero himself was responsible. He certainly took advantage of the resulting devastation of the city, building a lavish private palace on part of the site of the fire. Perhaps to divert attention from the rumours, Nero ordered that Christians should be rounded up and killed. Some were torn apart by dogs, others burnt alive as human torches. Over the next hundred years or so, Christians were sporadically persecuted. It was not until the mid-third century that emperors initiated intensive persecutions.

Reasons for persecution

Why were Christians persecuted? Much seems to have depended on local governors and how zealously or not they pursued and prosecuted Christians. The reasons why individual Christians were persecuted in this period were varied. In some cases they were perhaps scapegoats, their faith attacked where more personal or local hostilities were at issue.

Contemporary pagan and Christian sources preserve other accusations levelled against the Christians. These included charges of incest and cannibalism, probably resulting from garbled accounts of the rites which Christians celebrated in necessary secrecy, being the *agape* (the ‘love-feast’) and the Eucharist (partaking of the body and blood of Christ).

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Pagans were probably most suspicious of the Christian refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods. This was an insult to the gods and potentially endangered the empire which they deigned to protect. Furthermore, the
Christian refusal to offer sacrifices to the emperor, a semi-divine monarch, had the whiff of both sacrilege and treason about it.

Thus the classic test of a Christian’s faith was to force him or her, on pain of death, to swear by the emperor and offer incense to his images, or to sacrifice to the gods. In the mid-second-century account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, officials begged Polycarp to say ‘Caesar is Lord’, and to offer incense, to save his life. He refused. Later, in the arena, he was asked by the governor to swear an oath by the ‘luck of Caesar’. He refused, and although he was apparently eager to meet his death, beast-fighting had been declared closed for the day and so he was burnt alive instead.

General persecutions tended to be sparked by particular events such as the fire at Rome under Nero, or during periods of particular crisis, such as the third century. During the third century the turn-over of emperors was rapid - many died violent deaths. As well as this lack of stability at the head of the empire, social relations were in turmoil, and barbarian incursions were on a threatening scale. The economy was suffering and inflation was rampant. Pagans and Christians alike observed this unrest and looked for someone or something, preferably subversive, to blame.

It was hardly surprising that a series of emperors ordered savage empire-wide persecutions of the Christians.

Toleration?

Although fourth and fifth century AD Christian narratives tend to describe the preceding centuries bitterly as a period of sustained and vicious persecution, there were in fact lulls. How can we explain this? Well, the Roman empire was in the first few centuries AD expansionist and in its conquests accommodated new cults and philosophies from different cultures, such as the Persian cult of Mithraism, the Egyptian cult of Isis and Neoplatonism, a Greek philosophical religion.

Paganism was never, then, a unified, single religion, but a fluid and amorphous collection. But it would also be a mistake to describe Roman religion as an easy, tolerant co-existence of cults. ‘Toleration’ is a distinctly modern, secular idea.

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The very history of Christianity and Judaism in the empire demonstrates that there were limits to how accommodating Roman religion could be, and these were not the only cults to be singled out for persecution.

The cults of Bacchus and of Magna Mater had also been suppressed - by the Roman senate during the Republic, mainly because their behaviour was louche and ‘un-Roman’. Bacchic revels encouraged ecstatic drunkenness and violence, and the cult of Magna Mater involved outlandish dancing and music, and was served by self-castrating priests.
Under particular emperors, Christians were less liable to be punished for the mere fact of being Christians – or indeed, for ever having been Christian. Thus under Trajan, it was agreed that although admitting to Christian faith was an offence, ex-Christians should not be prosecuted.

### Constantine’s ‘conversion’

One of the supposed watersheds in history is the ‘conversion’ of the emperor Constantine to Christianity in, or about, 312 AD. Historians have marvelled at this idea. Emperors had historically been hostile or indifferent to Christianity. How could an emperor subscribe to a faith which involved the worship of Jesus Christ - an executed Jewish criminal? This faith was also popular among slaves and soldiers, hardly the respectable orders in society.

The story of Constantine’s conversion has acquired a miraculous quality, which is unsurprising from the point of view of contemporary Christians. They had just emerged from the so-called ‘Great Persecution’ under the emperor Diocletian at the end of the third century. The moment of Constantine’s conversion was tied by two Christian narrators to a military campaign against a political rival, Maxentius. The conversion was the result of either a vision or a dream in which Christ directed him to fight under Christian standards, and his victory apparently assured Constantine in his faith in a new god.

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Constantine’s ‘conversion’ poses problems for the historian. Although he immediately declared that Christians and pagans should be allowed to worship freely, and restored property confiscated during persecutions and other lost privileges to the Christians, these measures did not mark a complete shift to a Christian style of rule.

Many of his actions seemed resolutely pagan. Constantine founded a new city named after himself: Constantinople. Christian writers played up the idea that this was to be a ‘new Rome’, a fitting Christian capital for a newly Christian empire. But they had to find ways to explain the embarrassing fact that in this new, supposedly Christian city, Constantine had erected pagan coins, temples and statues.

How should we characterise Constantine’s religious convictions? The differing but related accounts of his miraculous conversion suggest some basic spiritual experience which he interpreted as related to Christianity.
His understanding of Christianity was, at the stage of his conversion, unsophisticated. He may not have understood the implications of converting to a religion which expected its members to devote themselves exclusively to it.

However, what was certainly established by the early fourth century was the phenomenon of an emperor adopting and favouring a particular cult. What was different about Constantine’s ‘conversion’ was merely the particular cult to which he turned – the Christ-cult – where previous emperors had sought the support of pagan gods and heroes from Jove to Hercules.

The ‘triumph’ of Christianity?

Contemporary Christians treated Constantine’s conversion as a decisive moment of victory in a cosmic battle between good and evil, even as the end of history, but it was far from that. Christianity did increase in numbers gradually over the next two centuries, and among Constantine’s successors only one, the emperor Julian in the 360s AD, mounted concerted action to re-instate paganism as the dominant religion in the empire. But there was no ‘triumph’, no one moment where Christians had visibly ‘won’ some battle against pagans. Progress was bitty, hesitant, geographically patchy.

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Christianity offered spiritual comfort and the prospect of salvation on the one hand, and attractive new career paths and even riches as a worldly bishop on the other. But plenty of pagans, both aristocrats based in the large cities of the empire and rural folk, remained staunch in their adherence to an old faith. Some hundred years after Constantine’s ‘conversion’, Christianity seemed to be entrenched as the established religion, sponsored by emperors and protected in law. But this did not mean that paganism had disappeared.

Indeed, when pagans blamed Christian impiety (meaning negligence of the old gods) for the barbarian sack of Rome in 410 AD, one of the foremost Christian intellectuals of the time, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, regarded the charge as serious enough to warrant lengthy reply in his mammoth book ‘The City of God’. Paganism may have been effectively eclipsed as an imperial religion, but it continued to pose a powerful political and religious challenge to the Christian church.

Find out more

Books

*Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* by Peter Brown (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992)

*Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* by Peter Brown (Cambridge, 1995)

*The Early Church* Henry Chadwick (London, 1967)

Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine by Robin Lane Fox (London, 1986)

The End of Ancient Christianity by Robert Markus (Cambridge, 1990)

About the author

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Christianity was born in the Roman Empire. Jesus Christ was executed by Roman authorities in Jerusalem, a city in a Roman province. His disciples set about spreading the word of this new religion with remarkable success in the crowded cities of the Empire. Early persecutions of Christians were probably carried out at the whim of provincial governors and there was also occasional mob violence. Christians’ refusal to sacrifice to Roman gods could be seen as a cause of bad luck for a community, who might petition for official action. The first and most famous great persecution was the work of Christianity in the Roman Empire was an important religion which evolved from being a marginal, persecuted faith in the 1st century to becoming the state religion during the late 4th century.

Christianity originated in the Roman province of Judaea, where the Jewish rabbi Jesus spread the Gospel (“good news”) to fellow Jews and preached about the arrival of the Messiah, God’s plan to save humanity from its sins, and the steps which needed to be taken in order to create God’s kingdom on Earth. From 64 Relations between the Roman Empire and Christianity. We have here to explain how the attitude of the Roman empire, at first friendly or indifferent, developed into one of fierce conflict, the different stages in the policy—if we can speak of any uniform policy—of the Roman government toward Christianity, the charges or mode of procedure on which Christians were condemned, and when and how the profession of Christianity (nomen ipsum) became a crime. We shall see the Roman empire progressively weakening and Christianity gaining ground. For the sake of clearness we shall divide the Roman empire... The persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire occurred throughout most of the Roman Empire's history, beginning in the 1st century AD. Originally a polytheist empire in the traditions of Roman paganism and Hellenistic religion, the Christianization of the Roman Empire brought early Christianity into ideological conflict with the imperial cult and the practice of making sacrifices to the deified emperors, which violates Christianity’s prohibition on idolatry; Christians were punished for not The Roman Empire did not become Christianized overnight. Roman religious beliefs changed slowly over time. At the time the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 CE, Christianity was still spreading. It is also important to remember that Christianity itself did not appear suddenly or fully-formed. Christianity grew out of Jewish traditions and was shaped by Roman cultural and political structures for several centuries.