

HOW AND WHY DID CHRISTIANS WIN THE ROMAN EMPIRE?

INTRODUCTION

Beginning with a handful of sometimes-hesitant followers in the small and obscure Roman province of Judea, Christianity has now grown to become the faith of nearly a thousand million of the earth's inhabitants in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It is the nominal faith of approximately one-third of the planet's population. It has spread more widely and is deeply rooted among more peoples than any other religion in the history of mankind. In addition the Christian community has experienced a growth in maturity, which matches the outward expansion in numbers and prestige.

This vitality is all the more remarkable in view of the competition from other religions and ideologies, and the often-sharp opposition to the faith throughout history on the part of large numbers of intellectual and political leaders. From the attacks on Celsus and Lucian of Samosata in the second century, to those of Voltaire in the eighteenth and Karl Marx in the nineteenth, and the disparaging hostility of H. L. Mencken and Adolf Hitler in the twentieth century, Christianity has not only held its own but continued to expand.

Increasingly, Christianity moved away from its base among the Palestinian poor and began to attract more members from among the prosperous and educated sections of the society. Nevertheless, the new religion ran into severe difficulties when it attempted to reach out into the Empire of Rome.

It made little headway at all in some areas until its evangelism was backed up by political and military force following Constantine's conversion. To understand more fully the impact of Christianity on its environment and vice versa, we need to go beyond the rhetoric of the imperial propaganda machine and learn something of what life in the empire was like for the majority of its citizens. Though, my given scope in this account is limited to the period of the Empire of Rome, however, I would try to demonstrate my understanding of the challenges faced by the Early Church in the Roman Empire and at the same time relating each point directly to the historical factor that enabled the Church to triumph over those circumstances.

AGAINST THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY OVER THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Throughout the early centuries, tensions arose with the Church as it struggled to establish common 'rules of engagement' in relation to Roman society and its values and ensure its own survival and growth in a hostile environment. Though, in this culture there were many opportunities for the gospel to spread through several factors but there were also potential dangers. Christians frequently became the subject of malicious rumour. Public outrage, stoked by such rumours, could easily spill over into violence or call down the wrath of the authorities.

Christianity, in the early centuries, had a particular appeal for those at the bottom of the social pyramid because it cut across these rigid social divisions. It offered the message that, in Christ, all people of whatever race,

class or sex were of equal importance and could play an equal part. That was an antithetical to the ideology of the Roman Empire and it challenged the prevailing social norms and structures at a number of levels. For example, Roman society was largely rural agricultural. There was a great divide between upper and lower classes, rich and poor. The upper class had many legal and political privileges and immense political power. Life for the majority lower class was tough: few legal rights, poor living conditions in the towns, many survived on state handouts. Large slave population, regarded as property. The society was conservative; the basic unit was the family, controlled by the father, and women had few rights.

Non-citizens did not qualify for the dole and so it is hard to estimate their numbers, but most cities had sizable populations of transient people, economic migrants and traders. These were classed as resident aliens. They had few legal rights and often suffered racial discrimination. They therefore tended to band together in their own neighbourhoods and form their own social, religious and trade associations to provide for their collective needs. Such organisations were kept under strict scrutiny by the authorities, who were highly suspicious of any activity that might be potentially subversive. Christianity was treated as an unauthorised association of this kind after it separated from its Jewish parent-body.

The basic unit of society during the time of Roman Empire was the household. This extended network of relationships included not only blood relations but also other dependents such as slaves, freedmen, and associates

bound to the family by the ties of patronage. At the head of this network was the father. He guarded the family honour, controlled the family finances and took responsibility for the performance of the family's religious and civic duties. In this conservative environment, Christianity laboured under a great initial disadvantage when it was forced out from under the umbrella of Judaism. It was a 'new' religion that called people to make a clean break with the past and place the values of the Kingdom before the demands of family and community loyalty. As such, it offended against some of the most deeply rooted sensibilities of its audience and was likely to attract hostile attention from the authorities.

In the third century, a resurgent school of Neo-Platonism led by Ammonius Saccas and Plotinus proved to be Christianity's sternest intellectual opponent. It profoundly affected the thought of speculative Christian theologians such as Origen. For example, Epicureans denied that the gods had any concern for, or involvement with, human life and denied any concept of an after-life. In their view such religious beliefs caused unnecessary anxiety and pain and thus prevented people from attaining the state of 'pleasure', which is the highest human good. Thus, Epicureans considered Christian teaching about the incarnation and the reality of divine judgement and resurrection to be naïve and unscientific mythology.

Further more, how could you explain the Trinity to people whose view of God was shaped by the Platonic vision of a supreme being who is without change or passion and whose perfection demands that there should be no division of

his substance? Or the earthy and messy reality of the Incarnation to people who believed that there could be no true union between flesh and matter? And how could you retain a belief in the goodness of creation and the ultimate redemption of all things in an environment, which held that salvation meant liberation from this earthly realm and absorption into the realm of pure spirit? The early Christians struggled to find answers to these questions.

FOR THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY OVER THE ROMAN EMPIRE.

The early Christians were Jews and maintained strong links with the Jewish way of life. Some wanted to win Judaism from within, but this hope was destroyed with the destruction of Jerusalem. Hostility between Jews and Christians may have been high, but the family resemblance between the two faiths continued to be close enough to confuse pagan onlookers such as Celsus who, in the second century, insisted that not a shadow of a donkey separated them. At least in the early years of its growth, the Church was able to use its connections with Judaism to advantage.

The Jews of the Diaspora were notably active missionaries, inspired by prophetic teachings, which spoke of Israel's calling to bring the knowledge of God to the nations. They were the first to introduce the concept of conversion to an exclusive and monotheistic faith into a religious environment dominated by a tolerant polytheism. In the early years of the empire, increasing numbers of people were drawn to explore this religious option in more depth and came to admire the rationality of Jewish beliefs,

the ordered solemnity of their worship and the high ethical standards that characterised their strong communal life.

Some went so far as to convert, but this was a radical step, which involved a virtual abandonment of one's family background and social status in favour of an association with the nationalistic faith of a defeated people. It also involved accepting circumcision and or baptism and observing the strict Jewish food laws. Many were therefore content to remain on the periphery of the Jewish communities as 'God-fearers'. As such, they could quietly develop moral and spiritual disciplines and continue to share in the teaching and worship of the synagogue whilst maintaining their Roman identity.

In another development, the colonial activities of Alexander the Great and his successors in the East had been to promote the Greek language as a common medium of expression among the trading and business communities, which operated in all the major cities. It had then been taken up very widely so that by the first century AD Greek had replaced the local dialects in many places and could be understood by people throughout the Roman Empire. As a *lingua franca*, Greek also served as the main medium of cultural expression in this period.

On this background, the scattered communities of the Jewish Diaspora, in particular, opened the door for Christianity to penetrate into the gentile world and gave initial shelter under which to grow. They had already begun the process of translating Hebrew thought-forms and religious ideas into a

form understandable in the Greek world. The primary medium for this communication was the Septuagint (LXX), which was a Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures. This was produced to give Greek-speaking Jewish communities across the empire access to the ancient texts, which uniquely embodied the historical experiences, and normative values, which were the bedrock of their common identity.

The Septuagint also gained a wide readership among the pagan intelligentsia, who placed a high value on the traditions of the past and were inclined to respect the Jewish scriptures as texts containing ancient prophecies and divine wisdom. Thus, when the first Christians set out to take their message into the Roman world, they found an audience already familiar with the Jewish scriptures and ready to accept arguments based on the fulfilment of Jewish prophecy.

Christians tried to work within the structures of society. They were careful to avoid giving unnecessary offence by their dress or behaviour, especially in the more public realms of corporate worship and organisation. Thus, despite the practical and theoretical equality given to slaves within the Church, Christians made no outright attack on the institution of slavery as an evil in itself. Also, as the need to establish a socially respectable profile for the Church increased, women were gradually excluded from the more public roles in its leadership. Later apologists made particular efforts to stress that Christians were good citizens intent on preserving rather than destroying society, in spite their refusal to serve in the Roman army.

Among the less educated, the loyalty of some to the gods of their ancestors and their provincial homelands had been undermined by the gods' evident failure to protect them from Roman conquest. It had also been disrupted by social upheaval and economic migration in an increasingly cosmopolitan society. Increasingly, however, people were seeking other outlets for their religious energies that were more emotionally fulfilling and morally demanding. Their expectations of finding such outlets were raised by the variety of new religious options on offer.

On this background, the basic claim of the early Christians was that they had discovered a different way of life that was better than that offered by the non-Christian world. They believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah or Christ, and that he had freed them from their sins and transformed their lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. They were, in the words of the apostle Paul, new creations in Christ. They believed that theirs was a better way because it offered the believer forgiveness of sin, peace with God, hope for the future, a new and higher ethical code, power to live up to that special ethical standard, and life after death.

In addition, from the beginning, Christians have always been concerned to give proper respect to the duly constituted government as demonstrated by Paul in Romans chapter thirteen, where he seems to be arguing against anarchism. Christian emphasis on a community of love sealed by baptism appealed to many people who were otherwise without hope and desperately

lonely. Many felt themselves adrift in a world grown too large, and they craved the type of intimate fellowship offered by the Christian congregations. The Christian community made no distinctions based upon race, nation, cultural status, slavery, freedom or sex. The Christian church was to be gathered from every nation, all tribes, peoples and language-groups. Frequent meetings for worship, study sharing and the celebration of love feast called the 'agape' fostered the sense on community. In short, the community of Christians gave many otherwise outcast people a real sense of identity and belonging.

Furthermore, the early Christians were aggressively evangelistic. They wanted to share their newfound life in Christ with others less fortunate. They believed that Jesus was the Son of God and that he could do what he claimed. They wanted to spread to the entire world the good news of new life in Christ. They were certain that they were right and were convinced that they had found ultimate truth or reality and values in Jesus and his teachings.

Another impetus that led to the growth of the early Christian movement is the stimulus of the resurrection of Christ. It is hard to conceive that there would have been any Christianity without a firm belief by the early disciples in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. They were convince that their master had conquered death and had appeared to many of them in person. Only this resurrection faith explains how the small, motley, demoralized group with Jesus left on earth after his reported ascension could have developed the

enthusiasm to sweep all obstacles before them in their bold worldwide mission. A few disheartened followers were transformed into the most dynamic movement in the history of mankind. Without this firm belief in a risen Christ, the fledgling Christian faith would have faded into oblivion.

One other vital element in the growth of early Christianity was persecution and martyrdom. In fact, persecutions, far from limiting the growth of Christianity, on the contrary, appeared to aid it. The first intensive effort by the state to eliminate Christians came after the burning of Rome during the reign of the Emperor Nero in AD 64. Nero made the Christians the scapegoats for the disaster, and they were savagely tortured and burned, at least in and around Rome. Empire-wide persecutions came periodically in the third and early fourth centuries. Untold numbers of Christians died heroically for their faith; only relatively few recanted. So impressive were the many who died gladly for Christ that they were more than replaced by fresh converts.

Wars between rival Kingdoms would have hindered the spread of the teaching of Jesus over the whole earth. We may not agree with the theology or the historical judgement implicit in this statement, which ties the success of Christianity to the success of an often brutal and repressive dictatorship. However, it is undoubtedly true that the Early Church took full advantage of all the opportunities for international evangelism that the Pax Romana offered. It was able to establish itself more quickly and to a greater extent

within the Roman Empire than it was in any of the surrounding states such as Persia or India.

The above-mentioned Pax Romana ensured safe and relatively easy travel routes. Along these routes, the gospel and other cultural and religious traditions travelled. They were carried not only by missionaries but also by traders, students, government officials, tourists and a host of ordinary people going about their usual business. The New Testament and other early Christian writings witness to the amount of travelling involved as Christians set about the task of creating and nurturing Christian communities throughout the empire.

Whatever the case, the fourth century conclusively marked a major turning point in the history of Christianity. It saw the beginning of a new age of theological sophistication and of the rapid growth of the institutional church. The stronger growth of a hierarchy among the clergy, an increasing emphasis on liturgical worship, and more and more stress on the sacraments – especially baptism – in the process of salvation through the church. But the Roman Empire, having surrendered to Christianity in the fourth century, collapsed from the twin diseases of internal decadence and invasion in the fifth and sixth centuries.