
UNIT 3 RELIGION AND THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE ROMAN WORLD*

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

Roman civilization emerged during the first centuries of the first millennium BCE, and as it expanded across the whole Mediterranean region it assimilated diverse cults and sects – what we today commonly call religions – of the societies it encountered. As in other civilizations during the same period, Roman religious practices served social and political purposes, and were connected to the rhythms of daily life. Roman authorities both patronized and repressed cults and religious practices in the process of state formation and consolidation. As Rome's form of government changed later in the first millennium BCE from republicanism and limited kingship to autocracy (an empire ruled by *caesars*), and as the frontiers of the Roman rule expanded beyond the Italian peninsula, several new religions emerged in Romanized areas and others spread beyond their places of origin. Of the new religions, Christianity came to enjoy a privileged status after 300 CE in the Roman world and it became deeply embedded in the power structures of post-Roman societies (after 500 CE).

After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- know about religious practices and traditions in the Roman world,
- list the factors responsible for the spread of Christianity.
- understand the developments associated with the rise of Christianity to the political structure of the Roman Empire, and
- appreciate the features of early Christianity and comprehend how they were carried over to post-Roman societies, especially in Europe and the Byzantine empire.

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

As we have discussed in the previous Units of this Course, ‘Rome’ emerged as a city in Italy around 800 BCE and became the capital of a small polity that for the next five centuries received little attention from its powerful neighbors: the Greek city-states (some of which planted colonists in the Italian peninsula itself), the vast Persian empire, and various tribal kingdoms along the northern, southern and western edges of the Mediterranean Sea. Eight centuries later ‘Rome’ meant not only a great city but an empire of about sixty million people (almost the same as the population of the Chinese Central Kingdom at the time) that extended into west Asia (the ‘Near East’), northern Africa and a large portion of the continent today called Europe.

While we can trace a Roman cultural pattern – some historians and other scholars use the term Romanity – it is more difficult to generalize about the many forms of religion practiced in the Roman world. There were several ‘major’ religions, including pantheism (worship of multiple, ‘all around’ gods and goddesses) in the Greek pattern, Judaism, Manichaeism, ‘mystery religions’ (including Mithraism: see **Section 3.4**), and possibly hundreds of minor cults and worship patterns. And there was of course Christianity, which emerged during the first century CE as a sect in Roman Judea – partly building on the centuries-old Jewish faith tradition and partly rebelling against it – to become the state religion of the whole Roman empire by the late fourth century CE. The Roman Christian leaders who adopted the title Pope (from the **Latin** word *papa*: father), including Pope Leo I in the fifth century CE, aspired to lead a world-wide community of Christian worshippers, even though there were by that time several types or branches of Christianity in Asia and Africa whose leaders did not always acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope in the city of Rome. A reasonable estimate of the world’s Christians around the year 400 CE puts *as many as half of them beyond the borders of the Roman empire*, as far away as Persia (the Persian Sasanian empire¹ challenged Roman rule over what are now Syria, Jordan and Turkey), Arabia, Armenia, Georgia, central Asia, north Africa, Ethiopia and perhaps India. Nevertheless, it is significant that the popes in the city of Rome since the time of Leo I have taken the title Supreme Pontiff (in Latin, *pontifex maximus*: chief priest of the state religion), which was a title and office held by Roman rulers for centuries before the emergence of Christianity.

Judaism: monotheistic religion of the Jews dating back to at least 1500 BCE. In its original form, Judaism holds that God (Yahweh) revealed his laws and commandments to Moses, a leader of the enslaved Israelites, in written and oral forms that comprise the *Torah*, the main part of the Hebrew Bible (or ‘Old Testament’ to the Christians). Strong commandments and prohibitions were characteristic of Judaism; this rigour of practice went into Christianity and subsequently into Islam.

Manichaeism: religious movement originating in Persia named after Mani (216-274 CE), whose philosophy emphasized the eternal struggle between good and evil. Mani originally belonged to a Jewish-Christian sect called the Elcesaites. After experiencing visions as a teenager, Mani left his parental sect and travelled to Afghanistan, where he encountered Hindu and Buddhist teachings. Because Mani’s preaching was seen as a threat to the majority Zoroastrian religion of Persia, he was imprisoned and died. Some aspects of the life of Mani were told by the scholar al-Biruni. Manichaeism influenced Christians not only in the areas under Sassanid (Persian) rule but in (still) Roman Asia Minor, Egypt and north Africa.

¹ Sasanian (or Sasanid) empire: ruled by the house (dynasty) of Sasan, 224-651 CE, with its capital in Istakhr (Persepolis), in present-day southern Iran. The Sasanian empire encompassed a large part of the world traditionally controlled by the Persians and was the last Persian empire before the rise of Islam. For further details, see **Unit 13, BHIC-102**.

To the people of the Italian peninsula recognized as ancestors of the Romans, the Etruscans and Latins, worship of various deities (gods and goddesses) was integral to the life of elite as well as common people. Rome emerged as a coalition of tribal societies in central Italy and incorporated many of their social and cultural (including religious) practices. Long before the formation of Roman Christianity and for three centuries after the birth and supposed resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, ‘native’ or indigenous Roman deities were worshipped. People in and around Rome (the capital, the ‘Eternal City’ celebrated by Roman poets Tibullus, Ovid and Livy) practiced ancestor worship and also worshipped deities of their tribes and of the state. Family ancestors were memorialized in household rituals and ceremonies. This was Roman *domestic* religion, similar in nature to what is practiced in China and other societies around the world. Other forms of early Roman worship involved veneration of gods and goddesses of sun and moon, fertility and victory, as was practiced in other societies of ancient Europe, the Near East and Africa. The early Roman state sponsored temples and sacred sites and enforced worship of deities favoured by leading Roman officials. Temples honouring ‘native’ Roman deities, such as Janus (god of beginnings and endings) and Vesta (goddess of the hearth or home-fire), were located in Rome’s Forum and on the Capitoline Hill, near the most important buildings and spaces of political life and civil authority.

A deity who came to be worshipped as central (if not the supreme god for all Romans) was Jupiter. This ‘king of the gods’ was adopted by Romans from the older civilization of the Hellenes (‘Greeks’), who worshipped Zeus: thus, Jupiter of the Romans was a renamed Greek deity. Romans by c. 400 BCE had adopted or imported several deities from the Greek *pantheon* (collection of deities), just as educated Romans were expected to learn the Greek language through which to study Greek poetry, drama and philosophy. Hera, wife of Zeus, was brought into Roman religion as Juno, and the children of Zeus and Hera – Hermes, Ares, Athena and Aphrodite – were integrated into the Roman religious pattern as Mercury, Mars, Minerva and Venus. Likewise, Chronos, the Greek ‘Father of Time’ and proto-god who was parent of both Zeus and Hera, entered the Roman pantheon as Saturn. Hades, son of Chronos and brother of Zeus and Poseidon (Roman Neptune), entered Roman religion as Pluto. Official Roman practice until the fourth century CE permitted worship of the (originally) ‘Greek’ deities alongside the ‘native’ Roman deities of family and state. Temples of Jupiter and Saturn were especially important, being funded by the state and located near the Forum in Rome. Romans also championed several fertility cults and ‘mysteries’ that had originated in different places around the Mediterranean Sea and Asia (see **Section 3.4**).

In sum, while different forms of religions were practiced across the Roman world, they did not have a social meaning separate from politics and issues of public order. A radical innovation of the Roman state during the fifth century CE was the effective prohibition of all worship practices other than those promoted by the leaders of the Christian Church (Roman Catholicism). The late Roman state made a distinction in law between Christians, who were proper subjects enjoying protection of Roman law, and **pagans** and heretics, whose freedoms were limited.

3.2 RELIGION AND THE ROMAN WORLD: A CIVILIZATION OF BORROWINGS

We may begin to understand the rise of Christianity in the Roman world by more closely examining, first, aspects of Roman culture and its inheritances or borrowings from other cultures, and second, the means by which ‘Rome’ impressed its stamp on the tens of millions of people it came to rule beyond the Roman heartland. The Greek or Hellenic impact on Roman society from about 400 BCE has already been mentioned.



Figure 3.1: Head of Janus, Vatican Museum, Rome

Credit: Loudon Dodd

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Janus1.JPG>



Figure 3.2: Vesta, the virgin goddess of the hearth, home and family in Roman mythology

Credit: Guillaume Rouille

(Promptuarii Iconum Insigniorum)

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vesta-Roma.jpg>

As might be expected, when Roman rule spread to Gaul and Spain, north of the Alps, along the valleys of the Danube river, to the Near East and to northern Africa, principal cities in the Roman provinces became filled with temples of the official (or state-supported) Roman cults. The Roman cults existed alongside temples of 'local' deities, which the Romans patronized as a way of gaining acceptance of the local population. For example, the ancient Semitic deity Baal was recognized by the Romans as Jupiter Heliopolitanus, and the Romans erected or re-modelled Baal temples (for instance, in Baalbek, Lebanon). Whether in the city of Rome or in other centres of Roman power, management of important temples was sought after by Roman gentlemen, both the patricians who sat in the Roman Senate and the plebeians (non-nobles) who aspired to political office.

At some points in Roman history, supreme leaders, who were already chief priests of the state cults, were proclaimed gods, usually after their deaths. For example, Gaius Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE), had a statue of himself placed in the temple of Quirinus, one of the ancient Roman deities of war. Julius Caesar's self-deification was unusual and objectionable, though including rulers in the imperial cult after their deaths was common. In several ancient societies, such as the Assyrians, Persians and Egyptians, supreme rulers were seen as gods or demi-gods. Romans too were used to recognizing legendary heroes as gods and new cults were established all the time, and some of them were quickly forgotten.

The phenomenon of veneration of the dead, whether family members, state rulers or legendary founders, which has been common in many societies throughout history, throws into question basic definitions of religion, the sacred and worship, about which there are various scholarly opinions. Is veneration of human beings part of religion or different from it? Can mortals become 'divine'? Can 'the sacred' only remain so if it is clearly separated from the 'profane', the everyday? The Latin term *religio* is derived from the verb 'to bind' or 'to tie', suggesting that religion in Roman society was understood as an obligation or duty. A cult (*cultus*) had to have care-givers or followers: 'cult' and 'cultivation' are words from the same root. Some Roman religious practices happened in an institutional framework and others did not. Not all Roman religions had, or evidently required, officials (priests or priestesses) or a formal theology. Cultic practices could be either voluntary or legislated. Thus, entering the sanctum of a temple of Jupiter, following a street procession of idols or honoured objects, observing one day of each

week as a day without labour (such as the Jewish Shabbat or **Sabbath**²), placing food or drink before the statue of an ancestor, gathering in a group to hear a religious teacher read from a sacred book, participating in a ceremony to get initiated into a group of fellow believers – all of these were expressions of religious behavior in the Roman world.



Figure 3.3: Julius Caesar, Gardens of the Tuilleries

Credit: Jastrow/Ssolbergj

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Julius_Caesar_Coustou_Louvre.png



Figure 3.4: Statue of Constantine I, Capitoline Museum, Rome

Credit: Jean-Christophe BENOIST

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rome-Capitole-StatueConstantin.jpg>

Scholars have pointed out that in studying the ancient Roman world, as other times and places, there is a danger of identifying too many human practices as religious. What about, for example, magic and astrology, which the original Romans and the people they assimilated practiced? Many Romans would not have considered these arcane practices as separate from religion. We might take as either encouragement or caution the observation of the sociologist of religion, Emile Durkheim (1858 - 1917), that religion is basically each society's worship of itself. Nevertheless, key issues in understanding Roman religion concern worship practices and rituals, how these habits were permitted, encouraged or enforced by ritual specialists or teachers, and how officers of the state responded to the different communities of worshippers (of various cults). As we shall see, Roman officials in the first four centuries CE saw the spreading cult of Jesus Christ, 'Christianity', as especially problematic. As historian Marvin Perry observes:

To many Romans, Christians were enemies of the social order: strange people who would not accept the state gods, would not engage in Roman festivals, scorned gladiator contests, stayed away from public baths, glorified non-violence, refused to honour deceased emperors as gods, and worshipped a crucified 'criminal' as Lord. Romans ultimately found in Christians a universal scapegoat for the ills burdening the Empire, such as famines, plagues, and military reverses.

Perry, 2012: 111

Note that Roman civic (political) and religious officialdom had usually cooperated, so the spectacle of Christians disobeying officials and the law, trying to define a sphere of

² In the Jewish tradition a compulsory day of rest and worship (mentioned in the Book of Exodus 31: 13-17), as commanded by God to Moses. The Christians adopted this Jewish practice, most Christian sects shifting the day of sabbath observance from Saturday to Sunday.

activity above or beyond the civil law, marked Christians as revolutionary in the literal meaning of the word. The potential and actual conflict between religious duties and civil power and law is a theme that runs across 'European' history both before the official collapse of the Roman polity in 476 CE as well as afterwards, though the basic issues are by no means unique to Europe.

The foregoing sections have suggested that religions grew up in the Roman world as traditions of the 'core' Roman society absorbed alien influences and the Roman state adapted to challenges. While more inhabitants of the Roman empire were subjects than citizens, Roman citizenship could be confirmed or acquired by military service. By serving in Roman armies, countless Africans, Syrians, Greeks, Slavs, Spaniards, Gauls, Germans and Britons gained legal and political benefits of Roman-ness. Assimilation of barbarians, whether through conquest or alliance, was preferable to the Roman empire facing constant resistance from those at its borders. It is clear that the Roman empire's success was also due in some part to *cultural accommodation* – ways in which Rome adopted beliefs and practices of populations it subjugated. This was a complex process of negotiation and was not necessarily the result of a preconceived strategy. By adopting 'foreign' religious practices and deities, Roman occupiers could blend in with the populations they ruled and accrue prestige and respect as protectors of the local cults. Local populations were in turn Romanized by acknowledging the religious practices and patronizing the cults of the Romans, just as they accepted other aspects of Roman civilization including Roman laws.

The Hellenization of the Roman world has already been mentioned. In addition to adopting Greek deities, the Romans were awed by Greek *philosophia*, which involved contemplation of physical matter as well as of what was (invisibly) beyond or behind matter, metaphysics, and of ontology (questions of being). Greek philosophers in the six or seven centuries before Christ had speculated about the relationship between body and soul and about the continuation of the soul beyond the death of the body (immortality). The *Confessions* (autobiography) of Augustine (354–430 CE) and his work *The City of God* help us understand how educated Romans who converted to Christianity dealt with earlier traditions of knowledge and contemplation. Augustine was an African Roman subject who became Christian bishop of Hippo and was proclaimed a saint. Augustine and other 'Church Fathers'³ tried to use Greek philosophy to justify (explain) their Christian faith. Among Augustine's conclusions was that Jewish and Greek learning could be of use to Christians: wisdom of the pagans should not be entirely rejected. Neoplatonism (referring to Greek philosopher Plato, 428/427–348/347 BCE) from the third through sixth centuries CE was a trend of thought developing in Alexandria, Athens and some other intellectual centres around the Roman world that had Christian communities. Neoplatonists promoted the idea of an unknowable source, 'the One', at the beginning and end of all reality and beyond observable reality. Several Christian sympathizers with the Neoplatonists equated 'the One' with God. In the sixth and seventh centuries CE, the Christian intellectuals Procopius (a historian), Boethius and John Philoponus were using ideas of Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers in disputes with **bishops** and other church authorities, and these uses of pagan knowledge were not prohibited or punished.⁴ Later in the Middle Ages, when the theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224 or 1225–1274 CE) pronounced philosophy to be the handmaiden of religion, he was acknowledging a Christian debt to the pagan Greeks.

³ Or apostolic fathers (in succession to Christ's first disciples): Christian teachers, theologians and church administrators of the period c. 100–700 CE who are seen as the founders of institutional Christianity. Their importance is indicated by the fact that many Church Fathers have been declared saints by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

⁴ Bishop from Greek *episkopos*, meaning 'guardian': see Keywords at end of the Unit.

3.3 THE CHRIST CULT AND THREAT TO ROMAN RULE: FROM PERSECUTION TO PROMOTION

According to Christian authorities of all Christian churches or sects, Jesus of Nazareth was raised by Jewish parents (Joseph and Mary) of humble social status, he received divine revelation, he took to preaching across Judea, he was opposed by some other Jews as a false prophet, and he was executed by Roman authorities in Jerusalem as a threat to public order. Whether or not we believe the Christ story, we can gain insight into the rise of Christianity through the Christian Bible – the New Testament, composed first in Greek, but also subsequently in Latin, Syriac, Armenian and other languages – as well as from works by and about the ‘Church Fathers’, men like Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, Basil, Athanasius, Anthony, John Chrysostom, Aphrahat and Isaac of Antioch. Texts have survived by and about exemplary female Christian leaders of that time. Other useful sources are the stories of the lives of the early saints, holy men and women commended for their actions or their defiance.

The Christian saints were martyrs (*martyrs* = Greek for ‘witness’) for their faith. Stories about them provided lessons about behaviour and shaped the self-definition of the Christian faith: literally, the saints’ tales shaped the Christian self. As might be expected, these sources favour the Christians and criticize the pagans or heretics; they depict the martyrs’ righteousness and suffering as part of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity. (The Latin word *pagan* by the fifth century CE meant any non-Christian.) Secular or non-Christian sources from this time reveal other reasons of conflict and suffering: Christian rejected Roman customs and social norms – such the imperial cult celebrating emperors – and defied the law.

The Biblical account of the life, death and reported resurrection of Jesus the Christ (of Nazareth) as well as non-Christian accounts like that of the Roman historian Titus Flavius Josephus (37-100 CE)⁵ reveal one obvious reason for the Roman state’s suspicion of the Christ cult: some Jews who resented Roman occupation of the ancient Jewish kingdom (Judea or Israel) greeted Jesus as their Messiah, ‘the anointed one’ who would rule the Jews and perhaps other peoples in an age of universal peace. The New Testament itself does not make very clear what Jesus actually wanted for his Jewish homeland in terms of political rule. The legend of Jesus as an executed Messiah, a martyr for Jewish freedom, presented a challenge to Roman control over Judea and the neighbouring region. Roman authorities executed Christ in degrading fashion along with common thieves and he was mocked as the false or pretending ‘King of the Jews’. There is little direct evidence of Christ’s apostles – the messengers bearing his teachings and the founders of the church – playing a major role in the Jewish political and military unrest of the second half of the first century CE. Roman Jews were among the first Christ followers, but many Jews saw Christ as a false Messiah. It is evident, though, that the Jesus story appealed to non-Jews throughout the empire. The main books of the Christian Bible included the reports by the apostles of a being who had a human mother, who was both man and son of God, who was a religious teacher, who was seen to die, and who was seen to revive (be ‘resurrected’) and ascend to the realm of his heavenly father. Both Judaism and emerging Christianity took a harsh view of idol worship and of any and all forms of polytheism. In spite of many differences between emerging Christianity and established Judaism, both recognized only one omnipotent God – the God of Moses and Abraham as well as Christ – and almost all sects of Christians over

⁵ The key works of Josephus in this connection are *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*, included in *Works of Josephus*, Complete and Unabridged New Updated Edition, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, Massachusetts: M. A. Hendrickson Publishers, 1987).

the ages have accepted the Jewish ‘Old Testament’ as a foundation of their own faith. The sometimes tense and violent relations between Christians and Jews over the centuries have been tempered by recognition of a common stock of ideas and beliefs.

The growth of Christian communities during the third and fourth centuries CE prompted Roman authorities to pay more attention to them, to monitor more closely their relations with other communities and the Christians’ attitude towards government. The emperor Constantine I, who ruled from the eastern part of the empire, removed in 313 CE the legal prohibitions against and persecutions of Christians that had been put into place by earlier rulers. Constantine converted to Christianity only at the end of his life and he did *not* make Christianity the official state religion of the empire. Instead, he allowed Christianity to co-exist in Roman territories with other religious faiths and cults. Constantine also attempted to make Christianity more orderly by sponsoring church councils, such as the one held at **Nicaea** (in Asia Minor) in 325 CE to resolve disputes about Christian doctrine (theology) and church governance that had emerged among communities of Christians. Since Constantine did this without yet proclaiming himself a Christian, we may surmise that his main motivation was his imperial duty to maintain public order. Emperor Theodosius I in 380 CE made Christianity the state religion of the Roman empire, and by the middle of the fifth century non-Christians were prohibited from joining the Roman imperial administration. Many historians have cited evidence of growing intolerance of Roman and Eastern Christians in the late 300s and early 400’s CE towards people following other faiths and cults – including the many Roman subjects who worshipped Christ as the son of God *as well as other deities*. Before *c.* 350 CE there were evidently many part-time Christians. It is important to note that few Romans before that time, whether rulers or common people, regarded a person’s participation in more than one cult as a moral or political problem, so long as people respected civil authorities and the law.

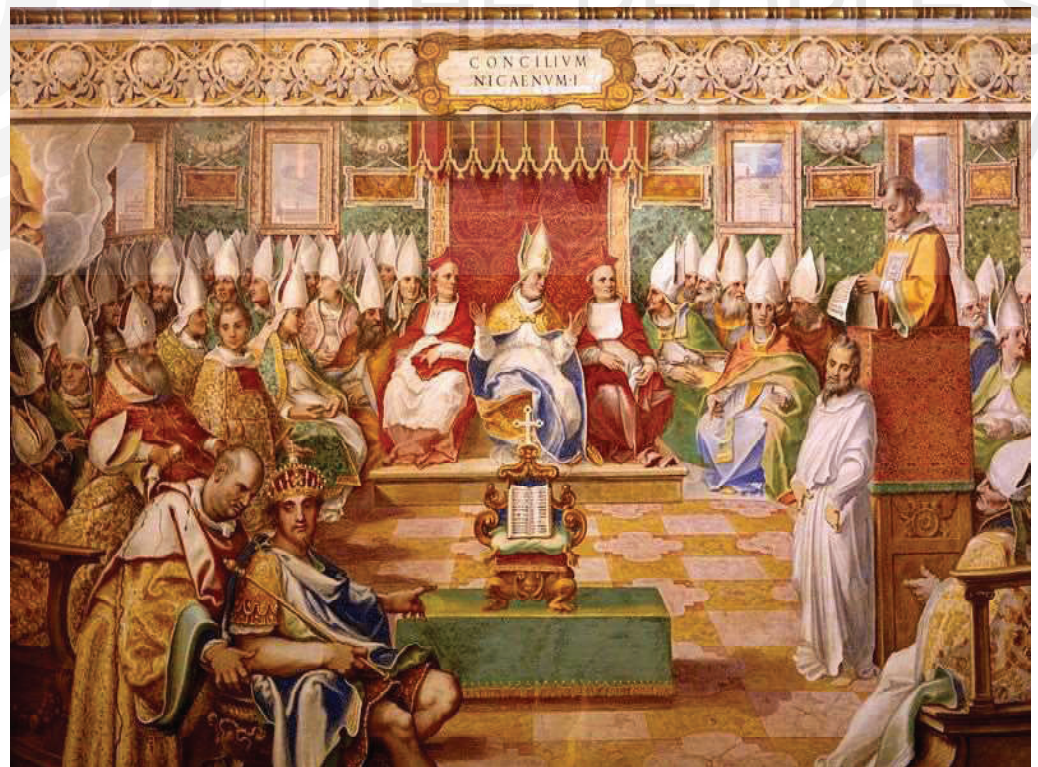


Figure 3.5: Council of Nicaea 325 CE

Credit: Fresco in Capella Sistina, Vatican

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicea.jpg>

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) Name some religious sects or cults in the Roman world before the dominance of Christianity and briefly describe the philosophies or ideas behind them.

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- 2) Why was the Roman world referred to as ‘a civilization of borrowings’? Explain.

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- 3) Describe some examples of Hellenization and the influence of Greek *philosophia* on the Roman world.

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- 4) Why would some people in the Roman world have understood early Christianity as a sect of Judaism?

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3.4 ‘MYSTERY RELIGIONS’ AND THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

In trying to explain the emergence of Roman Christianity and the specific forms it took, some scholars have emphasized the special relationship between the Christian cult and mystery religions, such as the Eleusinian mysteries and Mithraism. The Greek word *mystes* meant one who had been taught secrets – more specifically, one initiated or ritually introduced into membership of a cult. As mentioned before, there were several

old cults – such as the worship of Cybele, the Great Mother, that entered the Roman empire from the east – that involved mass or popular participation in rituals and observances to ensure fertility and plenitude (good harvests). Some ancient fertility cults involved animal sacrifices or rituals to welcome the flooding of a great river or the ‘return’ of the sun after winter solstice. The Eleusinian mysteries practiced at sacred sites in Greece, and probably pre-dating ‘Greek civilization’, celebrated the descent of Persephone into Hades (the under-world) and her return to the land of the living for about eight months of the year (spring and summer seasons). The cult was not open to everyone, only to *initiates* who participated in elaborate membership ceremonies. Similarly, Mithraism, which appears to have originated in west Asia and had Indic elements (Vedas mention Mitra, a goddess of light), was a cult linked to sun worship and involved sacrifice of bulls. Initiates gathered in underground chambers or buildings with cave-shaped rooms (*mithraea*) and benches installed for a common meal by the worshippers. Mithraism included ceremonies of ritual purification and promised rebirth or afterlife. In the Roman world the cult was especially favoured by soldiers. Hundreds of ruins of *mithraea* of Roman times have been found from Syria, Palestine and Armenia to Hungary, Germany and England.

Eleusinian mysteries are related with the cult of Demeter and Persephone based at Eleusis in Greece. This cult celebrated the abduction of Persephone from her mother Demeter and their reunion. Mithraism was named after a god of the Persians and Armenians, Mithras, with possible shared Indic roots (Mitra is praised in the *Rig Veda*). The art/iconography of Mithraism shows the god in three scenarios: springing forth as a baby from a rock; in heroic pose as an adult killing a bull while looking at the sun; shooting an arrow into stone causing water to spring. Because no Mithraic scripture or holy book survives, the theology of Mithraism remains speculative: some promise of immortality or transformation was evidently central to the cult. There were seven ‘degrees’ or ranks of members of the cult, with different secrets revealed with each degree.



Figure 3.6: Mithras Relief

Credit: Faustyna E.

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mithras-Relief.jpg>

The Christian basilicas (cathedrals) of San Clemente and San Prisca in the city of Rome have *mithraea* beneath them. This suggests a close relationship between Mithraism and Christianity during the three or four centuries of their co-existence. Either some Mithraists also practiced Christianity or Christians saw Mithraism as a parody or imitation of their ‘true’ faith, or both of these. Early Christian texts and reports are filled with complaints about the Mithraists. From one perspective, though, early Christianity appears not very different from Mithraism. Christians had initiations (**baptism** of children or adults to indicate joining the church), purification rituals and sacraments (blessing by a priest with holy water, ‘last rites’ of the dead to help them pass into heaven) allowed only to ‘members’ of the church or congregation, telling of sacred stories in congregation (church preaching) and group celebration of a meal. Christians celebrated the *eucharist*, ‘holy communion’, reminding them of the Last Supper eaten by Christ together with his apostles.

Mithraism and Christianity developed together in the Roman empire and, through rivalry, helped from each other. Mystery religions appear to have taught early Christians about rituals and ceremonies of belonging. Although Mithraism has no surviving holy book or scripture, it is plausible that Christians picked up ideas about transformation and about participation of humans in the divine mystery from Mithra-ist theology. The final phase of their competition saw the Christians abolishing Mithraism and other mystery religions during the fifth century CE as **heresy** (sinful and punishable error).

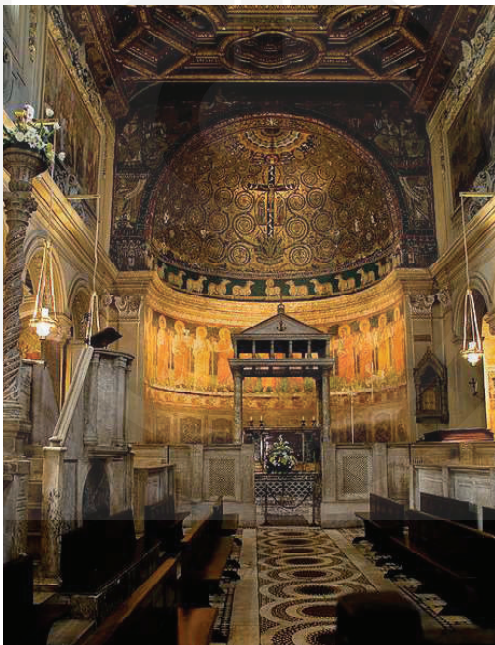


Figure 3.7: Basilica di S. Clemente

Credit: mppp(<https://www.panoramio.com/photo/3363563>)

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Basilica_di_S.Clemente_-_panoramio.jpg



Figure 3.8: Façade of Santa Prisca

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Prisca,_Rome#/media/File:Santa_Prisca-facciata-antmoose.jpg

3.5 CHRISTIANITY AND THE LATE ROMAN STATE

The collapse of the Roman empire was a prolonged process: to say that it ended in 476 CE with a barbarian occupation of the city of Rome (one of many over the centuries) is a simplification (For further details on Decline of the Roman Empire, see next Unit [Unit 4]). Under Constantine I there was a formal separation of ‘Eastern Rome’ (centered on Byzantium) from western Rome, and emperors calling themselves Roman and Christian continued to rule from Constantinople (city of Constantine, now Istanbul)

until 1453 CE. Constantinople became centre of another emerging type of Christianity, Eastern (Greek) Orthodox Christianity, headed by a Patriarch. The Eastern Orthodox church was Greek, not Latin, in language and liturgy, and Eastern Orthodoxy vied with Roman Catholicism for authority over the Christians of Asia, Europe and Africa. As we have seen, the power of the Christian Church strengthened throughout the empire from the third century CE and Christian sects gathered adherents on the margins of the Roman world. Indeed, Odoacer, the king of the Goths who occupied Rome in 476 as a client or sub-ruler of the emperor in Constantinople, was already a Christian, although of the Arian sect that was not approved by the Pope.

Pope Leo I equated the Christian realm (*orbis Christianus*) with Rome's empire (*imperium*), and educated Romans of the fifth century CE saw the Roman empire as the divinely ordained successor of 'universal' empires that included the empire of Alexander the Great, the Persian empire and the still older kingdoms of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Leo's equation of a Christian realm with a Roman *imperium* tells us about the ambitions of the **papacy** (the 'office' and institution of the Roman Pope) as 'protector of the faithful' and about the continuing political and cultural appeal of the Roman pattern of civilization. During Europe's 'Middle Ages' (c. 500-1500 CE) kings who aspired to rule larger territories in Europe, such as Charlemagne (King of the Franks from 768 CE, crowned in 800 CE Emperor of the Romans in Rome by Pope Leo III) and the German king Otto I (reigned 962 -972 CE as Holy Roman Emperor), cultivated the support of the Roman Catholic Church while also trying to limit its authority. By the eleventh century CE, *Christianitas* (Christendom) was a term used consistently by leaders of Europe to refer to all the lands of western and eastern Europe with Christian worshippers and Christian rulers.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Describe some similarities and differences between 'mystery religions' (including Mithraism) and early Christianity.

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- 2) Describe the changing relationship between Christianity and the Roman state between the first and fifth centuries CE.

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- 3) Why was the Christ cult considered a threat by the Roman rulers? Explain.

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3.6 SUMMARY

Just as Rome adopted political practices from the Greek city-states and subsequent monarchies, Christianity in the Roman world drew upon and modified Jewish, Greek and Eastern thought. The political triumph of Christianity in the Roman empire had consequences for the societies of Europe, Asia and Africa that saw themselves as successors to the Roman empire (after 500 CE). This Unit has not described several important features of early Christianity, such as the development of its symbolism, the role of monasticism (people ‘withdrawing from the world’ to contemplate the divine) and clerical celibacy (its male priests were discouraged from marrying), the denial of women’s participation in the priesthood, Christian art and architecture, or early Christian ideas and beliefs about education. But it has been shown how the Christians of the Roman empire (and of post-Roman Europe and the Near East) followed several different doctrines, whose custodians tried to impeach each other as heretics. Civil leaders were drawn into these controversies and sometimes tried to mend divisions among groups of Christians; at other times they exploited doctrinal conflicts to win groups of Christians to their side.

Despite the foundational stories of Jesus Christ and his apostles living simply and with indifference to the things ‘of the world’, the church leaders’ own praise of holy poverty and their condemnation of the world of politics that ensnared people in sin, the churches became wealthy institutions and churchmen wielded political power. From the fourth century CE onwards, bishops and other high church officials were predominantly wealthy Roman citizens, and some served their church along with holding other government offices, just as ambitious Romans had done in pre-Christian times. The church administrative district of Rome in the late sixth century CE was the largest landowner in all of Italy. The papacy, bishops and monasteries by that time owned estates across Gaul (France), Hispania (Spain and Portugal) and north Africa, and their counterparts in Eastern Rome were similarly favoured. The emergence of another major monotheism, Islam, in the seventh century CE, further consolidated the political, social and economic position of Christianity in the region that would eventually be called ‘Europe’.

3.7 KEYWORDS

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| Baptism | : Ritual immersion and initiation ceremony in most forms of Christianity, whether the baptized person is child or adult. |
| Bishop | : A member of the Christian priesthood who is ordained or appointed by a still higher member of the priesthood, such as a metropolitan, a patriarch or the Pope. |
| Eucharist | : From Greek <i>eucharistia</i> , ‘thanksgiving’. A sacrament (holy ceremony) of the Catholic and most other Christian churches. Through the sacrament of the <i>eucharist</i> worshippers achieve |

Heresy

communion (coming together) with Christ and God.

- : From Greek *eresia*, ‘thing chosen’, implying a religion falsely or ignorantly chosen. Heresy therefore meant willfully following false teachings and heretics were punished under the law.

Latin

- : Language originating in the Italian peninsula and the official, main language of administration of the Roman empire and later of the Roman Catholic church. Refers also to an Italian tribe pre-dating the Romans and their domain in central Italy.

Nicaea

- : Assembly or council meeting in 325 CE in Asia Minor, sponsored by Emperor Constantine I to resolve disputes about Christian doctrine (theology) and church governance that had emerged among communities of Christians.

Pagan

- : A non-Christian other than a Jew. From Latin *pagus*, an administrative district beyond towns. A *paganus* was therefore likely to be a simple or ignorant country person who was untouched by the new religiosity happening in the towns and cities.

Pantheon

- : From Greek ‘all divinities’ or ‘all gods’; collection of gods. The pantheon of the Greeks (Hellenes) included gods and goddesses who were imagined to be related to one another, much like humans.

Papacy

- : Referring to the spiritual and administrative office or domain of the Pope (Latin *papa* = ‘father’), the bishop of Rome, apostolic successor to St. Peter, leader of the worldwide Catholic faith/religion.

3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 3.1 for details
- 2) See Section 3.2
- 3) See Section 3.2
- 4) See Section 3.3

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 3.4
- 2) See Section 3.5

3) See Section 3.5

3.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Brown, Peter, (1978) *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Brown, Peter, (1993) 'The Problem of Christianization,' *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 82: 89-106.

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Lössl, Josef and Nicholas J. Baker-Brian (eds.), (2018) *A Blackwell Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity* (Malden, MA: Wiley and Sons).

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Sarris, Peter, del Santo, Matthew and Booth, Phil (eds.), (2011) *An Age of Saints?: Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill).

Taylor, David G. K., (2000) 'Christian Regional Diversity,' in P. Eisler (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, vol. I (London and New York: Routledge: 330-43).

3.10 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

Rome and Christianity, National Geographic

<https://video.nationalgeographic.com/tv/00000144-2f3a-df5d-abd4-ff7f265c0000>

Jesus: Rise to Power 3/3 Christians, National Geographic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0iDQ65Ubas>