

A. During the empire period, the religious life of Romans was a hodgepodge of beliefs from all over the world

1. Fortune-telling, astrology, numerology were popular ways of predicting one's future
2. The cult of the goddess Fortuna - carpe diem - literally "Seize the Day" meant enjoy what you have while you have it,
3. The State religion was the worship of the old Olympian gods and goddesses
 - a) the state cult was fine for ritual
 - (1) but the Olympian gods made no promises for the after-life
 - (2) the concept of life after death was a new and very popular message of hope for the beleaguered people of the empire
4. As part of the State Religion, worship of the deified emperors (and of the Gods) was a required part of citizenship and all public office as a show of faith and loyalty to the state; if not, treason (punishable by death)
5. There were also a few Philosophical Religions, which required education to understand, and thus appealed to the upper classes
 - a) Stoics: sought to suppress the emotions, approach all things in moderation, to reach a state of equilibrium with the universe (Zeno). Perhaps the most famous stoic was Marcus Aurelius. Who gained even more fame as the dying Emperor in the movie "Gladiator."
 - b) Epicurians: separated themselves from society, early on this religion was a means to avoid pain and suffering and free up the mind, (Epicurus). Later it became a good excuse to have an enormous party.
6. The various "Mystery Cults" which were more accessible than the ancient rituals of the state religion or the confusing language of the philosophical religions, and thus were extremely popular with the masses
 - a) these cults promised a life after death, usually with the example of a death-conquering hero who had died and rose again
 - b) Mysteries included education, initiation, ritual and community for all believers
 - c) Usually open to all people, although they could be limited (ie. men only), and appealed mostly to the masses
 - d) one could belong to some or all of these, including the state religion, examples:
 - i) Cult of Isis, the Egyptian goddess, stressed the old myth of her husband, Osiris, who was killed and later resurrected
 - (1) the cult admitted men and women
 - (2) there was a long initiation process

ii) Cult of Mithras, a Persian deity who was killed and raised from the dead (resurrected), it only admitted men, and was very popular with soldiers. It becomes the State Religion for a brief time.

(1) Mithras was identified with the Sun, who dies each sunset and is reborn each sunrise, his birthday was December 25th.

(2) initiates were "baptized" in cow's blood in a ritual called the Taurobolium

h) the religion known as Judaism. Centered in the area known as Palestine, Jews had travelled throughout the Empire.

(1) Monotheistic religion, one God. Abraham is the "Father" of the religion, the covenant of the Jewish people with their God was created through the act of circumcision. The religion requires a number of special requirements, including dietary (kosher), as well as other special observations, such as a Sabbath day.

(2) Both King David and Moses are major figures for the Jewish religion. Years later, circa 4th Century BCE, the ideas of the religion were written in what today is often called the Old Testament. The laws brought down by Moses are called the Ten Commandments.

(3) The religion requires that members do not idolize any other Gods other than their God. This presents a problem for the Romans.

i) it is within this social context that the Cult of Jesus gained in popularity; Christianity was born, an offshoot of the very ancient Jewish faith

(1) the cult's founder, Jesus of Nazareth, claimed he was the Messiah, the culmination and fulfillment of Jewish history (the Old Testament)

(a) although Jesus had stayed within the bounds of Judaism, he was condemned by the Jews and executed by Rome

i) Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead three days later, and ascended to heaven to be with God

(b) Jesus' teachings, preserved in four books called Gospels, collectively called the New Testament, include:

i) people are to live with utter integrity--purity of heart

ii) they are to live with a whole-heartedness which excludes pride of any kind - they are to be humble

iii) they are to be sensitive to others, sensing the oneness of oneself and others

iv) they are to love one another, as God loves them

v) they are to accept persecution, to "turn the other cheek," and to love their enemies

vi) they are to expect that God will judge them and their actions at the end of time

vii) for a summary by Jesus of his teachings see the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5

(2) the cult started only among Jews in and around Jerusalem, but it quickly spread to the Romans and Greeks all over the Mediterranean world

(a) it was his disciples, especially Peter and Paul, who spread the philosophy of Jesus

(3) Christianity was like the other Mystery Cults in many ways

(a) it too had a god who died and was resurrected

(b) like the others it offered community, ritual, and hope of a life after death

(4) but unlike the others, it was exclusive

(a) like the Jews they believed that their god was the ONLY god (monotheistic-One God) that existed, and to worship any other was wrong

(b) the Christians' refusal to worship the emperor and the state gods discounted them from all public office

(5) Christians were mistrusted, misunderstood, and sometimes savagely persecuted

(a) indeed, they were blamed for almost every problem the empire ever suffered

IN ADDITION TO THE BELOW READ AND REVIEW PAGES 160-161->Rise of Christianity- for the Life and Teachings of Jesus.

Background on early Christianity

Upon Jesus' death a number of people began a movement which would become known as the Cult of Jesus, and later as the religion, Christianity. The early members of the cult were all **Jewish**. Some Jews believe Jesus was the **Messiah**, but most rejected the idea. Two Jewish people who came to accept it, were **Paul** and **Peter**. Both are considered to be the foundational figures to early Christianity. Peter met Jesus, however, Paul may not have met or seen Jesus since most of his activities were ten or more years after Jesus was crucified.

Paul, (originally Saul, a Jew from Tarsas located in Asia Minor) came to accept Jesus as the Messiah when he saw a "**light on the road to Damascus**" (an **epiphany**). As a follower, Paul advocated allowing non-Jews into the new cult, and preached about the the new Christian religion. Travelling throughout the Mediterranean, Paul "spread the word" (**witnessing**) of the new religion, later to be known as Christianity, however at the time it was still known as a type of Judaism. During Paul's travels, he wrote letters describing his views of this new unfolding religion, those letters became known as the **Epistles** (letters of Paul) to churches. These letters are the oldest writings of the **New Testament** of the Bible.

Peter (original name Simon, he was given the name Peter after Jesus told him he would be "the rock of the church", in latin the word rock is Petra) went to Rome and spread the word. He later became the church's leader in Rome, and came to be known as the first **Bishop of Rome**. Subsequently the Bishop of Rome became known as the Pope (Papa in Italian) or Pontiff. There are many bishops all of whom are supposed to be equal but the Pope is known as the first amongst them all (later this rule became known as the **Petrine Creed**, in honor of Peter). The current **Pope/Pontiff** is Pope Benedict XVI who is from Germany. Almost every Pope, except for a few of French or Spanish descent have been Italian (the current Pope is Benedict XI he's from Germany and John Paul II who died in 2005 was the first Polish pope). It's believed that Peter's remains are in Rome, the seat of the Catholic church today.

The area in Rome where the Pope sits is now called the **Vatican City**, it is a separate and sovereign nation-state. The main church/cathedral in the Vatican is St. Peter's, named for the apostle, Peter.

Both **Peter** and **Paul** were eventually **martyred** (executed by the Romans for their unwillingness to give up their faith). In the first three centuries of the Church, several people were martyred. The first Emperor of Rome to persecute Christians was **Nero** who tried to blame them for a fire that engulfed Rome in 64 AD. Peter himself was crucified though upside down (his choice).

One of the most important events in Christian and Jewish history occurred in 70 AD (CE). The Emperor Vespasian sought to enforce Roman Rule in Jerusalem, this eventually led to an event called "**The Last Revolt.**" The Jews of Jerusalem fought the Romans, but eventually lost. With that loss, the Romans destroyed the **main temple of Jerusalem**, called the 2nd Temple (the 1st Temple was destroyed much earlier). The destruction of Jerusalem led to the exodus of Jews and the Cult of Jesus from the area. For Jews the destruction of the 2nd Temple was especially important because afterwards, Jewish groups chose not to have a primary, central Temple but rather, synagogues and houses of worship each of which would be distinct and relatively independent. This led to the decentralization of the Jewish religion. The Christian religion would later have a main church in Rome and be highly centralized.

Later, the Romans also destroyed a fortress known as **Masada**, where a group of extremely strong religious followers, which today we term "**zealots**" who managed to stave off the Romans for a number of years, until finally they saw that they were about to be defeated and all committed suicide (recent evidence calls into question whether the residents of Masada really did commit suicide). For the new Cult of Jesus the loss of the 2nd Temple, along with the continued antagonism between the Cult and the main Jewish order led to a wider division between the nascent Christian religion and Judaism.

The final straw for Judaism in Judea/Palestine was in 130 AD (CE), the Roman Emperor **Hadrian** ordered that a temple to the God, Jupiter, be place in Jerusalem. Another war ensued, and the Jewish groups lost again, this time the Jews were forced to leave Palestine. The exodus from the area later became known as the **diaspora** or

dispersion. Today the term, diaspora, is often used to describe any racial/ethnic group forced to leave their homeland and spread around the world.

Judaism at the time of Jesus, and amongst many today, required strict adherence to many rules; including, diet (**kosher**, not eating pork or shellfish as well as not mixing dairy products with meat), **Sabbath observance** (Friday night to Saturday), **circumcision** (surgical ritual on males, removing the foreskin of the penis), and **learning Hebrew**. While people could convert to Judaism, which like Christianity, was a **monotheistic** (one god) religion engaged in charity works as well as speaking out on moral issues like infanticide, it unlike the new religion, required people to give up many of their own traditions. **Paul** is generally credited with liberalizing the new Cult of Jesus. Despite Peter's misgivings, **Paul argued that the new followers to could follow many of their old traditions, and did not have to follow the Jewish rules.**

During the time period between the first and second attacks (70-130 CE) in Jerusalem, the first four chapters of the **New Testament** were written; **Matthew, Mark, Luke and John**. Several others **Gospels** were written as well (Gospel means literally "**the Good News**") however, early church leaders (council of Nicea in the early 300s) overwhelmingly decided that only these four would be included in the Bible and are now the first four chapters for the New Testament.

From the beginning Christianity witnessed strong growth, its' largest increase was among the poor and women of the Roman Empire. For the poor the new Church provided comfort, both physical and spiritual. Women were especially attracted to the church which spoke out against infanticide (a common occurrence in the Empire). The Church provided a sense of spirituality for a Rome that had become increasingly amoral and hedonistic (pleasure seeking (remember the epicureans?)).

Because the new Christians were unwilling to honor the Roman Gods (as well as the fears of Roman leadership of a competing authority), various Emperors; including Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius and Diocletian tried to stop the Christian religion from increasing in numbers. They persecuted Christians. Some Christians though not a lot became **Martyrs**, chose to die rather than to give up their religion, they inspired many to join the Church.

In the 3rd Century, Rome suffered devastating blows, including famines and plague, the number of poor rose, and the Roman government did not effectively deal with the problems. In part this was because so many wealthy people had moved outside of Rome. No longer living within the city walls (an exodus that started centuries earlier after the 2nd Punic War) the wealthy did not want to pay taxes to the City. These wealthy patricians lived on their virtually **self-sufficient estates (villas, latifundias)** and provided little money or other support for Rome. As a result, without money or capable leadership, Rome ended up being poorly administered. To fill the power vacuum Church leaders began to take on the roles of Rome's city government, establishing charitable services to the poor. This also inspired people to join the Church.

As the **3rd Century** ended, Christianity was divided into many groups within the empire, and the empire itself was having problems governing itself. The Emperor **Diocletian** (a Spaniard) tried to rejuvenate the empire. At one point, he divided the empire into four different areas, with leaders of each section. He also began to orient the Empire more and more away from Rome to areas in the East. This further eroded Rome's importance and its ability to govern itself. With so many governmental offices gone even more power in Rome devolved to the Church.

In the **4th Century**, the **Emperor Constantine** completely altered the status of the Christian Church. Constantine, whose **mother, Helena**, had previously converted to Christianity, became Emperor in the early 4th Century. Before rising to his title as Emperor, Constantine fought his brother-in-law. Prior to the most important battle (Battle of Milvian Bridge) Constantine allegedly had dreamt that his men won the battle by wearing shields with crosses emblazoned upon them. He also dreamt he saw the sun (son?) and believed that both of these were signs from God. Before the battle he had his men put the crosses on their shields. They won the battle, and Constantine unified his leadership over both sections of the Empire (NOTE: there is no proof that Constantine's men put crosses on their swords, many believe that Constantine made up the story years later to create a strong symbol (the Cross) that would unify the empire). Interestingly before Constantine's era, the Cross was one of several symbols for Christianity but after, it was the dominant one. The first public description of this dream by Constantine was many years after the Battle).

Early in his reign as Emperor, Constantine passed the Edict of Milan (**an edict is the equivalent to a law**), which allowed for the toleration of Christianity. No longer would

Christians in the Empire have to fear for their safety. Furthermore, Constantine who never officially became a Christian himself (though he may have converted upon his death) sent his mother Helena to Jerusalem to gather the **relics** of Jesus. Later, Helena built churches throughout the empire, including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which is allegedly on the site (**Golgotha**) where Jesus was crucified. She then returned to **Constantinople**, where Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire (previously known as Byzantium, renamed Constantinople in his honor), with the Cross that held Jesus (some believe it's buried in Istanbul) as well as the two other crosses of those crucified with him (she also allegedly brought the seamless tunic that Jesus wore, which today is in Trier, Germany and at times displayed to the public. Trier, Germany, which sits along the Rhine River, is where Constantine's father was stationed as a General on the outskirts of the Roman Empire). For the Catholic religion (the word Catholic means "universal") **relics, items such as bones of Saints or items associated with Jesus or Mary**, were and remain important, Cathedrals throughout Europe, often maintain several relics.

As the **fourth Century closed** itself out, the Emperor **Theodosius**, a Christian, made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. Ironically, now people who weren't Christian were persecuted for their beliefs.

During this time, Rome became less and less important for the Empire (in fact by 500 AD/CE, Rome population declined to 50,000 people, from an earlier peak of 1 Million). With administrative and military offices now in Constantinople (see page 167 in text), the Church filled the government's prior role and the new position, Pope, became more and more important to Rome.

Christians formed several groups during its first 400 years, some chose lives of solitary seclusion, others became active in the community. Critical decisions had to be made amongst **theologians** (those who study religion) on issues such as: what was Jesus' true nature and what was Mary's role as mother of Jesus? There were a host of other issues as well. These issues subsequently led to battles between the leadership in Constantinople and Rome. Centuries (1054 CE) later this led to a complete split between the Eastern Church to become known as the "**Orthodox**" (meaning straight thinking) Church and the Western Roman Catholic Church. The split between the Churches remains to this day.