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### Pagan and Christian Rome

Beginning at Caesar Augustus's reign and up to the years of Constantine, all of the various modes of worship were held "by the people to be equally true, by the philosopher to be equally false, and by the magistrate to be equally useful" (Gibbon, Vo1. 1, 73-74). The populace of Rome was from various different countries throughout the known world, and they were all able to exercise their ceremonies. Many of the emperors were deified after their death and were worshipped as such. However, during this period in history, Christianity had its roots and began growing throughout the Roman Empire. Although Gibbon attributes the growth of Christianity primarily to the doctrine itself, he gives us five secondary causes for this progress by Christians during this time period.

The "zeal of the Jews" is his first (Gibbon, Vo1. 1, 508). These people were adamant about not entangling their belief system with any other. Despite captivity, strong and oppressive powers, and nearby pagan nations, the Jewish nation would remain resolve. This heritage would continue under a new religion. Christianity would also ally itself to every form of human condition, in any place, to anyone on the earth.

The Roman Empire was overflowing with philosophers. One of their primary goals was to prove the existence of a "future state of the mind, i.e., an immortal soul" (Gibbon, Vo1. 1, 529). Paganism was never conducive to this idea. Christianity, of course, was able to supply at least its condition. This idea of an eternal realm of happiness was very popular to many in the Roman Empire, especially those who were not living well.

Gibbon believes one of the most effective tools of Christians was their use of miraculous powers. Ancient apologists specifically refer to the exorcising of demons as the most convincing. Others include the speaking of tongues, prophecy, physical healings, interpretation, and the raising of the dead. Gibbon states that this attribute weakened other religions and separated them from Christianity.

The fourth cause was “the pure and austere morals of Christians” (Gibbon, Vol. 1, 508). Thus, it was not only the faith of the Christian, but also the virtuous actions resulting from it. The most powerful idea tying itself to virtue was that of a life of penitence, where one had sin, and that that sin could be forgiven. Also, Christians would ally themselves with neither an army nor a government appointment. They felt that their doctrine restricted them from war and pagans persecuted them for this belief. However, their willingness to obey the laws and help their fellow man overshadowed their absence in war.

The final cause Gibbon gave to explain the growth of the church was its structure itself. The “government of the church” would encourage many Romans to forsake a restrictive pagan government and rule under a more open and free church system. The higher purpose it demanded, its equality and freedom, its unity, and its love for the brethren became attractive to many of Rome’s best citizens. While many pagans despised the teachings of this “sect,” they could not deny the kindness that these church officials possessed.

So with, what seems to be, an exponential growth of Christian converts, why were Christians persecuted? We must first recall that since no Christians would participate in Roman government, polytheists were at the helm. Their indignation toward Christians was mainly because of Christianity’s intolerance of other religions. Contending that they alone

held “divine knowledge and should disdain every form of worship except their own,” the Christians were overstepping their bounds as human beings (Gibbon, Volume 1, 588).

Christianity, while attractive to many, was also very different from the traditional Roman society.

These new converts seemed to renounce their family and country, that they might connect themselves in an indissoluble band of union with a peculiar society, which everywhere assumed a different character from the rest of mankind. Their gloomy and austere aspect, their abhorrence of the common business and pleasures of life, and their frequent predictions of impending calamities, which would arise from the new sect, the more alarming as it was the more obscure (Gibbon, Volume 1, 594).

By rejecting the temples and gods of the Romans, pagans ignorantly referred to Christians as a sect of atheists, thereby guilty of the highest penalty.

The persecution developed slowly, Nero being the first emperor to call for the execution of a multitude of Christians. He blamed them for setting the great fire of Rome and showed his contempt by covering many with combustibles and lighting the dark nights with their bodies. Under Trajan, about ten years later, it was customary to have public festivals where pagans surrounded Christians, and by superstitious ways decided whether or not they should be tortured. Although often the public voice was unheeded, it was also the case that a small group of tortured Christians could quiet the crowd. Many emperors and other government officials respected justice and equality and tried sincerely to avoid executing Christians, opting for the punishments of “imprisonment, exile, or slavery” (Gibbon, Vol. 1, 614). One of the most humane and wisest of the pagan emperors, Marcus Antoninus (AD 180), condemned Christians because of his obsession with philosophy.

During the first eighteen years of Diocletian’s reign (AD 284-303), he was very tolerant towards Christianity, and Christians prospered. However, his general, Galerius,

was able to convince Diocletian that Christians were a threat to Roman society. The new edicts promulgated demolishing every church and burning alive anyone who would not sacrifice to pagan gods. Being burnt alive often meant “being roasted by a slow fire, while soldiers exhausted every refinement of cruelty” (Gibbon, Vol. 1, 644). Diocletian went on to perform some of the cruelest tortures known in history in a futile effort to destroy Christianity. By 311, Galerius finally realized that no amount of persecution would be able to destroy Christianity and published an edict repenting of the persecution and even asking for the prayers of Christians for the empire. The last of the persecutions came and left with Maximin, who for a few months reinstated the persecutions until civil war suspended them indefinitely. Then came Constantine.

No historian is certain about the date of his actual conversion. Some say that it was after a miracle he supposedly witnessed; others say that it was after he killed his son; some religious scholars believe it to be near his death when he was baptized. Setting this aside, we should look at the conversion in a wider sense, primarily because it is the focal point of the transition of Rome from not accepting Christianity to accepting it, at the very least. Many say this moment in history changed the course of time itself; but, enough of the dramatics. Constantine had seen the persecutions of the Christians and did not understand how pagan bigotry on the basis of a mere religion helped society function. In AD 324, he became the protector of Christianity by promulgating the edicts of toleration, which stretched throughout the Roman Empire.

Gibbon gives us two reasons why Constantine would choose tolerance, these being “the humane intention of consulting peace and happiness to their people, and the pious hope that this may appease the *Deity*” (Gibbon, Vol. 2, 163). However, he also states the

underlying reasons that may have more strength. Constantine saw the immorality spreading through his empire. At the same time he witnessed virtuous Christians who, if given liberty, could spread their goodness throughout the land, which could, in turn, prevent wars. As modern writer Francis Fukuyama states that democracies do not fight one another, so the mind of Constantine was that “Christian nations” do not fight one another. Another reason was the Christian doctrine of obedience to rulers. More Christians meant less revolt for Constantine. His protection proved extremely beneficial, and Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, even extending to places like Germany and India.

Constantine would “celebrate his twenty-five years of empire by dedicating the city of Constantinople in AD 330” (Alfoldi, 110). His goal was to keep paganism out and allow Christianity to take hold of the city. From AD 330 to AD 337, Constantine began his attack on paganism. However, paganism was still comparatively more popular than Christianity at this time. Constantine did not want to stir up a revolt. Therefore, to *beautify* Constantinople, he would spoil pagan shrines and temples. He desired for this great city to be the hub of the “Christian Empire.” However, near his death, he acknowledged the greatness of Rome and conceded that Constantinople would always take second place. Despite that fact, Constantine initiated the transition period and his actions played the crucial role in paganism’s ultimate end.

In AD 378, fifty years after the death of Constantine, paganism began its final downfall. Emperor Gratian removed many of the pagan offices in the Senate, and confiscated the alter of Victory from the Senate Hall. The pagans were resilient and argued their beliefs by attributing Rome’s former success to paganism. They remind the

emperor that Rome was once a place to practice one's own religion without persecution. However, when Theodosius came to power in AD 388, he exiled those senators who vocally favored Jupiter over Jesus. He then asked for a vote, "Which should be the religion of the Romans, that of Jupiter or that of Christ?" (Gibbon, Vol. 2, 597). Afraid of the consequences, the once pagan majority became new converts to the cross.

Pagan Rome, as it was, was no more. Temples were destroyed and statues were either covered or crushed. Their last stand was made in the Temple of Serapis in Alexandria, Egypt. Theodosius came and made the ruling, while Christians stood on one side of the temple and the pagans on the other. Theodosius proclaimed utter destruction of the temple and decreed that a church be put in its place. His final edict, prohibiting sacrifice to any idol, was detrimental to the pagan religion. If caught, you were to be executed as one who committed treason. However, a pagan could still proclaim his religion, participate in government, write pagan documents, attend schools, and be honored as a soldier. He just could not practice it, because "the light of reason and of faith had already exposed, to the greatest part of mankind, the vanity of idols" (Gibbon, Vol. 2, 609).

We see that no more than a century after the conversion of Rome to a "Christian Empire," the Western Roman Empire fell to the Visigoths. Was this due to the change in society by Christianity? St. Augustine wrote on this very topic in his *City of God*, and he makes an important argument that is worthy of discussion. Pagans contended that Christianity was indeed to blame for their empire's fall. Augustine counters with the fact that Rome had already been in ashes twice, once due to the Gauls and the other under Nero, while Christians were being persecuted. Augustine goes further by stating that the fall would have been worse if pagans were still in power. "Alaric I - whose barbarian

hordes were responsible for the catastrophe in a practical sense - was fairly honorable in his approach to Christianity and took pity upon those who took sanctuary in the basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul” (Southgate). St. Augustine argues that Rome’s sack was a blessing to pagans; it was a chance to see the justice and impartiality of the Christian god.

His next contention answers the question about the legitimacy of the protection of pagan gods. He retreats back to history, giving accounts of Rome’s ill-state before Christ’s appearance on the earth. He then makes “a direct appeal to the pagan conscience” (Southgate). Many of their gods justified immoral actions and if deity would intervene, it is logical that it would be on the side of Alaric I. He also notes that pagans believed the world was immortal. A sack on Rome would only be part of the ongoing cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Therefore, the pagan gods would not necessarily protect the city because it would disrupt the cycle. Augustine ends his argument by pointing out the inconsistencies of pagan gods and their origins, and concludes with a strong defense of Christianity.

I will conclude by stating that Gibbon’s work, while old, is a nearly exhaustive essay on the Roman Empire and a great read. The beginnings of pagan culture were full of philosophy and thought. However, it eventually became evident that sacrificing to idols was a practice of futility and the morality and virtue of Christianity was too bright to be ignored. Although, like paganism, Christendom would soon undergo corruption, its simple doctrine and appearance today acknowledges its staying power.

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