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AN INQUIRY INTO THE CAUSES OF CHRISTIANITY'S  
TRIUMPH OVER PAGANISM

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A THESIS  
PRESENTED TO THE COMMITTEE ON THESES  
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BY  
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## CHAPTER I

### THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM TO BE INVESTIGATED

Considerable attention has been paid to the relative causes for the rise and triumph of early Christianity, yet few have given specific reference to the conflict between the two existing cultures, established Paganism and the new Christian movement. It is our purpose to inquire into the reasons why these two forces could not coexist in the same environment. In brief, "which should win—the obscure Christian, who had never fought a battle, or the cultivated pagan, who had never lost one?"<sup>1</sup> In correlation with this one must inquire into the causes for the triumphant Christianity.

Such a study pertains to the foundational principles of Christianity. It concerns itself with the formative years of the Faith, the areas in which Christianity revealed itself, took root in a minority populous and acted as leaven in a decadent world. Certainly a true representation of the early growth and ultimate domination of Christianity of the Roman Empire cannot

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Hurst, History of the Early Church (New York; Chautauqua Press, 1887), p. 9.

adequately be presented without a portrayal of its encounter with pagan society and its sublimity in comparison with such a culture. We shall see that though confronting multiform disadvantages, Christianity also had to meet the challenges of hostile forces in her early years. Such tension between the two cultures did much to develop and organize the primitive Christian faith and contributed much to Christianity as we know it today. Were no other reasons for our inquiry available, the present study would be justified.

#### A. Definition of Terms.

The terms Paganism and Heathenism are both used extensively throughout this study. For our purpose they are interchangeable and appear synonymous, for while paganism is neither Jewish nor Christian in character of worship, it is purely idolatry and very frequently polytheistic. For our study the terms will often refer to the state of morals and religious values of non-Christian people. The term comes from the Latin, paganus, meaning a villager or a peasant. It derived its present form from the name given to the country populace who remained heathen after the cities became Christian. The term is associated with ancient Rome and historically was not dissolved until the defeat of Licinius by

Constantine.

B. Organisation of the Study.

In a study of this nature the procedure must be chronological. Therefore it necessitates an investigation of the political, religious and moral conditions of the Graeco-Roman world of the first century A. D. It follows that within such depraved conditions, loftier minds were calling forth philosophies and religions to offer seeking men. There consequently existed competing religions within this culture which were to rival Christianity. We must therefore investigate the points of tension between Christianity and pagan forces, with an ultimate view of the dissatisfaction of pagan leaders with the inadequacy of polytheistic ideals.

We find it pertinent to the study to conclude with an investigation of the causes of the triumph of Christianity which we believe to be in the realms of politics, religion, ethics and philosophy. Attention will also be devoted to the historic interpretations of the cause of the rapid spread of early Christianity. In epitomization we shall cover with brevity the total movement and the positive causes for the ultimate triumph of Christianity over pagan thought and practice.

## CHAPTER II

### DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD OF THE FIRST CENTURY

For the study of any religion, be it Christian or pagan, the student finds it of paramount importance to know in what society and culture that religion has taken root and come into fruition. It is thus our task to endeavor to examine the features which distinguish the Graeco-Roman civilization of the first century A. D., from that of contemporary cultures. Furthermore, we must learn in what manner these characteristic elements contributed to the rise of a powerful and influential Faith.

When we survey the work of the historians in their treatment of this era of ancient history, we become well aware of the spiritual and moral apathy. T. R. Glover gives us a well framed nuclear thought, saying in part:

We have thus in Roman Society a political life of a highly developed type, which has run through a long course of evolution and is now degenerating; we have a literature based upon that of Greece and implying a good deal of philosophy and of intellectual freedom; and side by side with all this, a religious atmosphere in which the grossest and most primitive savage conceptions and usages thrive in the neighborhood of a scepticism as cool and detached as that of Horace.

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1. T. R. Glover, The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire (London: Methuen and Co., 1952), p. 18.

Consequently in our attempt to characterize the age and the empire into which our faith took birth we find it advantageous to take into careful consideration three intrinsic features of that world; namely, (a) the political condition of the Roman Empire, (b) the religious situation of the dominion, and (c) the moral atmosphere of the age and consequent hunger for emancipation from the grossness of the century.

A. The Political Condition of the Empire.

Christianity took full stride into a world which was cold and abject. A world politically dominated by Romanism and culturally domineered by Hellenism cultivated a unique setting for the cradle of Christianity. The Roman Empire contributed greatly, and we may well say singularly, to the consolidation of mankind into one political organization. It was thus that the dissolution of the local and tribal barriers resulted and the keen awakening of the pagan conscience to a cosmopolitan spirit.<sup>2</sup>

To this point in the political history of Rome, the government has passed through the throes, the resultant factor which produced numerous forms of statesmanship. The

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<sup>2</sup> George P. Fisher, The Beginnings of Christianity (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), p. 42.

historian Tacitus gives us a compendious view, when he says in part,

Kings held dominion in the city of Rome from its foundation: Licinius Brutus instituted liberty and the consulate. Dictatorships were resorted to in temporary emergencies: neither the power of the decemvirs continued in force beyond two years, nor the consular authority of the military tribunes for any length of time. The domination of Cinna did not continue long, nor that of Sylla: the influence of Pompey and Crassus quickly merged in Caesar: the arms of Lepidus and Anthony in Augustus, who, with the title of prince, took under his command the commonwealth, exhausted with civil dissensions. 3

We are thus brought to the era of Christendom, for it was during the time that the supreme power of Rome was vested in Augustus that Christ appeared in the fabric of the Empire. Let it suffice to say at this point that though Augustus Caesar proved to be the man of the hour in the annals of Roman history, his rule is not without sharp criticism.<sup>4</sup> Prostitution of political power and natural vice were prevalent in the age of debauchery.

A brief survey of the extent and character of the Empire is necessary to our study. Of no mean value is the fact that Rome centralized the pagan world of the age. It was the celebrated Augustus who erected in the Forum at Rome the milestone which denoted its centrality in the

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3 C. Tacitus, Annals, 1, 1.

4 Ibid, 1, 9.

ancient world. We are informed through the careful work of Latourette that the Roman boundaries at this age embraced a larger portion of the Mediterranean basin than had ever been united under one ruler in any previous generation. <sup>5</sup>

That Rome's populous was heterogeneous we may be sure. This is manifest in the wide extension of the Empire. With the peninsula of Spain as the western boundry and the river Nile forming the eastern border, the Roman Empire stretched vertically from the coast of northern France to the desert of Africa. As Roman legions advanced, the conquered were assimilated into the Empire. As Glover reminds us, the Empire extended its boundaries as it did by sparing the conquered, rather than by conquering. <sup>6</sup> The stimulating element of Rome's policy was its extension of citizenship with corporate private and political rights. Roman policy was one of extreme tolerance of local liberties and customs, as such were found compatible with imperial policy. <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, five volumes. Volume I, The First Five Centuries, (New York, Harper Bros., 1937), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> T. R. Glover, The World of the New Testament (New York, Macmillan Company, 1931), p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Dill, Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius, (London, Macmillan and Company, 1925), p. 203.

The chief contribution of Rome was in overcoming the principle of nationality and infusion of the concept of universalism. The value of this is evidenced by

Uhlhorn's statement:

Of infinitely more consequence is it that there was now developing in the Roman Empire a Universalism hitherto entirely unknown, the first step to the universalism of Christianity. At no point does the providential significance of the Roman Empire stand forth more strikingly than here. 8

But it is left to us to inquire into the means of such unification and assimilation of which we speak. Of political unity we have already spoken but it may also be said that all types of civilization converged and mingled within the confines of the Roman Empire, peoples from the most diverse origins and remote districts. Uhlhorn is not far amiss when he terms the Romans the "robbers of the globe" <sup>9</sup>, for surely Rome comprehended the majority of civilized mankind and the intrusion of her legions was conventional in the ancient world.

There was therefore engendered a cosmopolitan spirit of such magnitude that no longer could a provincial

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<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Uhlhorn, The Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 15.



worship or mannerism remain the possession of one people. Were such elements extended at one point they may now have no limit in their expansion.

It is well to be reminded that this universal spirit was a movement which had been in progress for some three centuries prior to the date of our present study for it had its true inception with Alexander the Great.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the fruition of such efforts now appear within the boundaries of the Roman Empire as it unites by its rule the many semi-autonomous city-states spread throughout the Mediterranean world.

The occurrence of a universal language and culture produced prolific results. The widespread understanding of the two great languages, Greek and Latin, sponsored a world of one intellect. The Greek language was the medium of universal barter and the free use of this language witnessed the first time when men could make free exchange of thought and ideas. Such unity of language simultaneously increased the similarity in social customs, commercial activities and imperial interests. That the Hellenism of Greece produced a startling contribution to the Empire and the world we may be sure.

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

A man brought up in circles where the influence of Greek culture was felt could not fail to find himself at home in every city of the empire, and to meet everywhere men of like sympathies and interests with himself. 11

Another factor of paramount importance in the consideration of the integrating elements of the Empire is the freedom of intercourse between the inhabitants of the Mediterranean basin. Under Augustus Caesar's reign a great stimulus was given to travel. Roman youth journeyed to Athens for study while Greek provincials ventured to Rome in turn.

With all this rapid circulation of officials and travellers, the far-stretching limits of the Roman world must, to the general eye, have contracted, the remotest places were drawn more and more toward the centre, and the inexhaustible vitality of the imperial city diffused itself with a magical power of silent transformation. 12

There now also reigned an economy of peace. The pax Romana produced a civilized world enjoying nominal peace. Latourette asserts that it was along the trade routes of commerce, themselves encouraged by the pax Romana, that Christianity was soon to make its advance-

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11 A. C. McGiffert, A History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 155.

12 Samuel Dill, Op. cit., p. 207.

ment with startling rapidity. <sup>13</sup>

Roman jurisprudence brought a unity to the empire that no other element could have done in like manner. Historians suggest that this was the great legacy of Rome. <sup>14</sup> Tacitus cries out against the numerous laws <sup>15</sup> but finds it necessary to give an account of the pre-eminence of the multitude of laws. <sup>16</sup> In generalization:

It was one of the means of reducing to homogeneity the component parts of the Empire. The conceptions that entered into the warp and woof of this great code were insinuating themselves into the common thinking of mankind. <sup>17</sup>

Our study involves the Graecian contributions and these are cardinal and distinctive but will only be mentioned briefly at this point. Greek thought, as did language, dominated the Roman world. As Christianity arose the prevailing Greek philosophy was sceptical <sup>18</sup> and her passion for inquiry firmly held society.

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, The Unquenchable Light (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> George P. Fisher, The Beginnings of Christianity, p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> C. Tacitus, Annals, 3, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3, 26.

<sup>17</sup> George P. Fisher, Op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> John Hurst, History of the Early Church (New York: Chautauqua Press, 1887), p. 11.

We now have a brief portrayal of the political environment and the geographical and cultural extent of the Roman Empire. But the fact of such contributing elements to the world of the first century does not delete the actuality of vice and pollution infused in that society. Gibbon sees with clarity the evil:

It was scarcely possible that the eyes of contemporaries should discover in the public felicity the latent causes of decay and corruption. This long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire. The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished, and even the military spirit evaporated.

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#### B. Religious Condition of the Roman Empire.

The life of the Roman Empire was permeated with religion. On every hand throughout the empire could be found countless temples, hosts of gods and goddesses, or in some remote district perhaps the reverence of the sacred tree. Roman religion itself was characterized by its practicableness, for their gods represented powers—numina—with very little personality attributed to them. We find it unnecessary in this present study to even suggest the gods of domestic life. What we do consider of prime importance is that the emperors saw the value of

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19 Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., n.d.), I, p. 56.

religion as it played the role of a bond on the conscience, disposing men to freely obey imperial decrees. Augustus Caesar made an express decree that every member of the senate should offer a libation in the temple before he take his place in the assembly.<sup>20</sup>

The Greek's imaginative and aesthetic power in the creation of gods was soon to be felt in Roman circles. In the hours of civil stress, Rome called the augur to consult the Sibylline Books with the result of the introduction and worship of certain foreign deities, always Greek in character.

From the time of the second Punic War to the religious revival sponsored by Augustus, Roman religion was rapidly decaying.<sup>21</sup> Syncretism, divination, augury, licentiousness, all worked to produce the decadence of religious faith and fervor. We may accept Hurst's statement with reserve in which he asserts that the entire body of people were hostile to any spiritual religion<sup>22</sup>, but we confirm the fact that it was a sensual desire that

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<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Uhlhorn, The Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Dill, Op. cit., p. 529.

<sup>22</sup> John F. Hurst, Op. cit., p. 12.

produced the myriad religious cults that now appeared.

Until the days of Augustus Caesar the religion of Rome was essentially political and mundane and consequently offered little to the deep aspirations of the human soul. Nor did the simplicity of life, so characteristic of the ancient Roman citizen, any longer exist, but was gradually being replaced by an arrogant and sumptuous aristocracy. The middle class which had been the woof warp of Roman society was now being supplanted by a corrupt plutocracy.<sup>23</sup> With the rise of this class there came a revolt from the faith of the age and a lapse into moral and spiritual apathy. It is with truth that Farrar says,

The upper classes were destitute of faith, yet terrified at scepticism. They had long learned to treat the current mythology as a mass of worthless fables, scarcely amusing enough for even a school-boy's laughter, but they were the ready dupes of every wandering quack who chose to assume the character of a mathematician or a mage. Their official religion was a decrepit Theogony; their real religion was a vague and credulous fatalism, which disbelieved in the existence of the gods, or held with Epicurus that they were careless of mankind. 24

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<sup>23</sup> E. De Pressense, The Ancient World and Christianity (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, n.d.), p. 417.

<sup>24</sup> F. W. Farrar, The Early Days of Christianity (New York: Columbian Publishing Company, 1891), pp. 8-9.

Therefore at the dawning of the reign of Augustus there was in the political sphere a deterioration into the vast abyss of corruption, and in the religious realm the apparent scepticism and yet an ever craving for a universal belief. <sup>25</sup> There arose in Augustus a man who saw it his mission to restore the ancient religion of Latium. <sup>26</sup> He revived old priesthods and ceremonies and sought to restore religion to its old place of power in Roman life.

But aside from the restoration of the ancient religion, Augustus brought in new features, primarily the Caesar-worship. Inaugurating, but pointedly not inspired by a real religious sentiment, the new imperial cult marks the genius of Augustus. Here let it prove sufficient to say that this genius-worship was destined to become the one universal form of religion and the touchstone of loyalty to the Roman capitol. With a study of such magnitudes we find it necessary to deal with at length in a subsequent cha ter. What we have intended to do here is to bring the historic sequence of Roman religion to the time of Augustus and show that the "Empire was a giant body, without a living soul." <sup>27</sup>

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25 E. De Pressense, Op. cit., p. 419.

26 Samuel Dill, Op. cit., p. 533.

27 Philip Schaff, The History of the Apostolic Church (New York: Charles Scribners, 1864), p. 157.

D. The State of Morals in the Empire.

"When faith goes, morals perish with it." <sup>28</sup> Surely the moral depravity of the age was at the very lowest ebb and in itself was sufficient proof of the failure of Augustus Caesar's attempt at religious restoration. Could one find a more lurid description of the vice of Rome than the portrayal by the Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Romans? <sup>29</sup> The writings of Seneca also abound with the tales of licentiousness, cruelty and sensuality which marked the age. <sup>30</sup> "Daily the lust of sin increases; daily the sense of shame diminishes." <sup>31</sup> Dean Farrar gives ample portrait of the moral condition of the Roman people:

Despising a life of honest industry, they asked only for bread and the games of the Circus, and were ready to support any government, even the most despotic, if it would supply these needs. They spent their mornings in lounging about the Forum, or in dancing attendance at the levees of patrons, for a share in whose largesses they daily struggled. They spent their afternoons and evenings in gossiping at the Public Baths, in listlessly enjoying the polluted plays of the theatre, or looking with fierce thrills of delighted horror at the bloody sports of the arena. At night

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28 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 94.

29 The Epistle to the Romans, 1:24-32.

30 Lucius A. Seneca, De Ira, 2, 9.

31 Loc. cit.



they crept up to their miserable garrets in the lodging-houses of Rome-into which, as into the low lodging houses of the poorer quarters of London, there drifted all that was most wretched and most vile. Their life, as it is described for us by their contemporaries, was largely made up of squalor, misery and vice. 32

We may properly inquire as to what produced such lewdness and vice within an Empire so mighty. Gibbon accounts for such conditions by the fact of monarchical government.<sup>33</sup> Other abnormalities brought about such moral degeneracy. (a) The immoralities connected with the pagan cults; (b) the luxury and extravagance brought about by the wealth pouring into the capitol; (c) slavery with all the base affections imaginable; (d) the position of women in the Empire, and (e) the amusements of the century, the stage and the arena.

Accounts relating the havoc wrought upon Roman citizenry through the immoral tales of Greek mythology are legion. The base conceptions of the mythology stories swelled the tide of corruption already striking hard at the existing chastity. The sacrifice of captives or slaves was not uncommon, while Sextus Pompeius caused

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32 F. W. Farrar, Op. cit., p. 5.

33 Edward Gibbon, op. cit., p. 81.

men to be cast into the sea as an offering to Neptune for Rome's victory over the enemy.<sup>34</sup>

Prostitution was made a part of the religious services.<sup>35</sup> In Corinth it was practiced in honor of Aphrodite. Revelry, terrible orgies and indecent songs accompanied religious ceremonies. Temples were places of corruption and obscenity. The temples of Isis often became the places of guilty intrigue.

With the vast conquests of the Roman legions there came an immense inflow of wealth into the capitol city. I am aware of the exaggerations that have been pictured, nevertheless, splendor and ostentatious exhibit were everywhere current. Life in Rome was a succession of festivities, with enormous expenditures on lavishly spread tables, hosts of slaves and elegant furniture.

While the populace of Rome went in want that beggars description, Roman ladies displayed unapproached splendor. Some are reported to have dressed in robes covered with pearls and emeralds, yet less costly than

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<sup>34</sup> Geo. P. Fisher, Beginnings of Christianity, p. 198.

<sup>35</sup> Tertullian, Apologeticus, 15, 7. "If I add that in the temples adulteries are arranged, that between the altars the pander's trade is plied....."

other dresses in their wardrobes. <sup>36</sup>

With the plutocracy, slavery existed with all of its base corruptions. In Roman law the slave-holder was vested with full authority, he could beat, maim or kill his slave. The slave was regarded as a thing-res. Slavery produced a marked effect upon the lives of the masters for too frequently they became hard and cruel and unappreciative of any service wrought them. Perhaps rightly can it be said that "the worst result of slavery was that every form of honorable labor was despised, and became, as a service of slaves, a disgrace." <sup>37</sup>

Roman law saw no qualities of humanity in a slave. When a master was killed in his house, the slaves of the household who had spent the night under his roof were executed if the proper murderer was not found. Tacitus records a law, decreed by the Senate, which states:

A decree of the senate also passed, equally tending to the vindication of justice and security; that if any one was killed by his slaves, those, too, who by his will were made free under the same roof, should be executed among his other slaves. <sup>38</sup>

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36 F. W. Farrar, The Early Days of Christianity, p. 4.

37 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 138.

38 C. Tacitus, Annals, 13, 32.

The public shows and amusements of the Roman people became an engrossing passion. The theatres were the centers of corruption and Tacitus sees an imminent danger to the dominion as he witnesses "the chief men of Rome exposed to scenic pollutions under pretense of encouraging poetry and eloquence." 39

The theatre consisted of licentious stories which in themselves depicted the literature of the age. Dancers knew no bounds in which their enthusiasm carried them and the unchastity and obscene characters played havoc with the morals of the citizenry of Rome.

Tacitus gives account of a sea-fight staged for the benefit of the populace as the multitudes crowded the adjacent hills along the river Liris. Only after great effusion of blood was the awful spectacle stopped. 40 He also reveals how infantry corps fought on suspended bridges extending over excavations of great depth. 41

Along with the gladiatorial show the public executions played a leading role for the entertainment of the royalty and populace. Many condemned were burned at a funeral pile, others were exposed to famished beasts

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39 C. Tacitus, Annals, 14, 20.

40 Ibid, 12, 56.

41 Ibid, 12, 57.

and torn limb from limb while others were tormented in unspeakable ways. 42

The position of the women in the Empire also reveals the morbid condition of the age. Family life disappeared and the concept of purity in marriage was regarded with disfavor. Tertullian challenges,

Where is the happiness of marriage so prospered I think by morals, that, in the six hundred years following the foundation of Rome, no house registered a divorce? But nowadays among women no limb of the body but is heavy with gold, wine forbids the free kiss; divorce-divorce by now is prayed for, as if it were the proper sequel to marriage. 43

#### E. Summarization.

The population of the Roman Empire steadily decreased and only a cloak of arrogance concealed an empire wreacked with sin. Our study of this age is relevant to our subject for it (1) shows the grossness of the age in which Christianity was born; (2) manifests the complete inadequacy of the existing philosophies and religious cults in coping with the moral and spiritual dissolution; (3) evidences a deep seated need for a dynamic, heart-gripping Faith.

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42 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 128.

43 Tertullian, Apologeticus, 6, 6.

## CHAPTER III

### COMPETING RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHIES

There existed in the early centuries of the Christian era rivaling religions and philosophies. That Christianity existed and grew midst such conflicting thought and passions and yet was destined triumph over such contention, is our task to portray.

Philip Schaff points out that there were three chosen nations of antiquity, the Jews, Greeks and the Romans.<sup>1</sup> Each attempted to originate and perpetuate some form of religious haven. Our attention is therefore directed toward, (1) Judaism and its distinctive features as marked by the contrast of a pagan world environment; (2) Stoicism and its mystical philosophy; (3) a brief survey of the later mystery religions; (4) the imperial cult of Rome, and (5) the impact of Christianity upon an antagonistic pagan world.

#### A. Judaism and conflicting Heathenism.

Our study of Judaism involves us in a brief investigation of what De Pressense terms "the history of the

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Schaff, History of the Apostolic Church (New York: Scribner's and Sons, 1864), p.138.

human conscience in the ancient world, as that conscience became illuminated by a revelation." <sup>2</sup> Though recognized from the days of Alexander the Great as an influential people in the political, religious and social spheres, <sup>3</sup> Israel stood as a distinct people in the midst of a pagan world.

Judaism stood mighty in her moral and ethical principles in the midst of a world robed in idolatry and wickedness. Therefore our first inquiry regards the elements of Judaism which made her the leader in the moral and spiritual realms. Though she won men through a common appeal, her attractive elements were none the less unique. Angus presents an epitome:

In a world craving spiritual power and moral reformation they attracted converts by the appeal of a venerable antiquity—an important item of apologetic in the Graeco-Roman world; by an austere and virile morality which gave them pre-eminence among the laxer morals of Paganism; by a resolute and robust theism and an invincible personal faith in God as the omnipotent Dispenser of the happenings of history; by regular congregational worship in democratic religious brotherhoods; by the scrupulous attention to the religious education of children; together with a general educational policy for the people; by the denunciations and promises of the synagogue

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<sup>2</sup> De Pressense, The Ancient World and Christianity (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, n.d.), p. 465.

<sup>3</sup> S. Angus, The Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 50.

pulpit; by the assurances of moral self-control and moral progress; by their superior holy books translated into the lingua franca, and by an energetic and competent literary apologetic. 4

(a) The religious scope of the Jew. The Jew was a specialist in the field of religion much as the Greek was in the sphere of philosophy. We encounter in Israel's sacred Books the radiant faith of the Psalmist, the unquenchable hope of the Hebrew mind, the ritual and cult of the Temple, the passionate plea for righteousness from the prophets and the legalism of the priests. That the religious mind of the Jew was contributive to the betterment of the world community is clearly manifest:

Wherever belief in a Moral Ruler of the universe was diffused, civilization received an impetus. Belief in such a Ruler gave encouragement to, and sense of responsibility for, a right use of life. Intellectual and social development became most marked in those Gentile communities where Jewish influence was greatest. 5

(b) The Jews maintained the monotheistic ideal not only through a great lineage of godly men but also because of periodic interpositions of God through His prophets. The all controlling feature of Jewish life was the individual's relation to the covenant God of Israel. Her

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4 S. Angus, Op. cit., pp. 51-52.

5 F. Hildekofer, Judaism at Rome (New York: James Miller, 1882), p. 2.



portrait of God whom she worshiped was that of Sovereign and Sustainer of her national life. Though a God of intervention on behalf of the welfare of Israel, He is nevertheless transcendent, omnipotent and awe inspiring. Paganism found it difficult to understand such worship and we are informed that as the victorious Pompey rudely brushed his way into the holy of holies, he found in amazement that there was no image of a deity. <sup>6</sup>

(c) The body of Sacred Scriptures. The Jewish Torah was a powerful authoritarian force which helped Israel withstand the great calamities that struck at the very foundation of her national life. In the Scriptures the entire gamut of human relations is covered, the Jewish piety, the passionate faith so prevalent and the cry of the oppressed. The sacred books played a major role in the counteracting of heathenism in the ancient world for in themselves they propagated the message of theism and sublime living. "The sacred books of the Jews were translated in Alexandria and entered into the commerce of ideas and beliefs." <sup>7</sup>

(d) The hope of immortality pulsed through the

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<sup>6</sup> Flavius Josephus, Antiquities, 4, 4.

<sup>7</sup> E. De Pressense, Op. cit., pp. 464-65.

life of every person in the ancient world but even more keenly in the life of the pious Israelite. The early messages concerning this subject were meager as well as pessimistic, for Sheol was the land of darkness and death. In the Book of Daniel we obtain an unquestionable affirmation that man's personality will survive and death shall thus be conquered.

(e) The Messianic hope of the Jew. The orientation of the Jewish religion was toward the future. It was a profound truth that God was to act in some decisive manner in the midst of Israel's national life. The very anticipation of the coming of the Messiah kept a high spiritual and moral depth of nature within the soul of the Jew.

(f) The ecclesiastical and institutional duties of the Jews are impressive and contributive. Of great importance was the Temple, the rallying center around which Israel's communal life was restored after the exile. We are informed that there was not an important city in the Graeco-Roman world which did not have the synagogue.<sup>8</sup> Hymns and prayers and ritualistic utterances were the center of the worship services. The ceremonial law was

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<sup>8</sup> E. De Pressense, Op. cit., p. 465.

codified and adopted; the Sabbath observance became a centrality of the faith. "There is no city of the Greeks or of the barbarians," Josephus says, "whither our custom of resting on the Sabbath has not come." <sup>9</sup>

(g) Indirectly we have mentioned the high morality of the Jewish people. Huidenkoper attributes to Judaism alone, the high moral sense which could ultimately lead to the improvement of the moral condition of men. <sup>10</sup> Thus along with the absorbing interest in religion, Judaism had a conscience more sensitive in the moral realm than that of any other people. The demand for a stern morality proved Israel's missionary bid to the world.

We now turn our investigation to the methods through which Judaism introduced herself to the pagan world. (a) This was primarily accomplished through the dispersion of the Jewish population. The providential guidance of the Jewish race is conclusive evidence of their uniqueness as a nation. The separation of the people and their seclusion created the peculiar cast and character which distinguishes them. The captivity took a people of great unity and religious and social

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<sup>9</sup> Flavius Josephus, Apion, 2, 40.

<sup>10</sup> F. Huidenkoper, Op. cit., p. 5.

qualities and scattered them over the breadth of the Empire. With them they carried their attributes:

The Temple, the ritual center of the entire nation, the Synagogue, promoting doctrine more than ritual, yet creating in all countries and cities new centres of Jewish life; with the Hebrew Old Testament and the Septuagint, appointed to carry to the heathen the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms of David. Palestinian Judaism, with the Temple and the Hebrew Old Testament was in the highest degree a centralizing power. To it gravitated all the countless scattered Jewish congregations. The Diaspora, with the Synagogue and the Septuagint, was a widely operative centrifugal power; through it Israel became a messenger of God, a missionary to the heathen world. 11

During the reign of Augustus there numbered somewhere near 40,000 Jews in Rome, and in the time of Tiberius, 80,000. Furthermore, seven synagogues are known to have been in Rome at this time.<sup>12</sup> Thus we have a view of the dispersion of the Jews among the heathen and the subsequent result of establishing a foundation of moral and religious precepts.

(b) The character of the Jewish people also had a great affect upon the pagan environment. The Jews, regardless of how far away they were from the main body, kept the keen sense of their national self-consciousness.

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11 Gerhard Uhlhorn, The Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), p. 82.

12 Ibid., p. 83.

They possessed a marked individuality, yet highly colored with a corresponding universalism. In any society the Jew remained a Jew for his high ethical standard distinguished him from the licentiousness of the age.

There was a marked difference between the Jewish conscience and that of the pagan regarding moral and ethical questions. As we have witnessed, the heathen prided themselves in the number and the nationality of their slaves <sup>13</sup>, while the Jews can rarely have been slaveholders during the first century.<sup>14</sup> Again, while the pagan reveled in the brutalities of the public games, Judaism repudiated savage amusements.<sup>15</sup>

In sharp distinction to the many gods of paganism, Judaism taught the existence of One Supreme Divine Being, one who took interest in the "moral education of mankind."<sup>16</sup> Paganism had its incompatible groups of deities, none of whom contributed or in the least way showed an interest in the improvement of morality among men. Tacitus protests that the gods seek only revenge, not security for

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13 C. Tacitus, Annals, 3, 53.

14 F. Huidekoper, Judaism at Rome, p. 86.

15 Flavius Josephus, Antiquities, 15, 8, 1.

16 F. Huidekoper, Op. cit., p. 17.

the people. <sup>17</sup> Paganism with its prevalent polytheism and Judaism with her high monotheistic concept could not be reconciled. The very fear of the heathen deities or "national" gods did not invoke or engender a spirit of satisfaction among pagan peoples, and thus many saw within Judaism a theistic principle which was appealing.

Although the Jews met pagan ridicule due to their imageless worship and precise religious duties, they proved to be the leaven of each community in which they located. The great teaching of the Jewish synagogue had its basis in God and a corresponding human responsibility. The heathen worship on the other hand contained little of the sublime in its rites. Divination and augury only appeased the conscience of the masses, while no high motives of heathen religious duties governed the morality of the people. Indeed it is said that

Those who can look up to, commune with, and derive encouragement from superior benevolence and moral worth, whether human or divine, must, as a rule, rise above those who have no such privilege. 18

Jewish writings treat the moral law as if there is no argument for its absolute obedience and necessity. It was a requirement which must be met, a commandment to be

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17 C. Tacitus, Histories, 1, 3.

18 F. Huidekoper, Op. cit., p. 25.

kept. Surely the portrayal given in the previous chapter illustrates the little moral influence that was present in pagan centers.

Judaism, with its manifest weakness, was towering over a pagan world. The religion of the pagan world was completely inefficient and corrupting in practice. But the very antiquity and stability offered through Judaism extended to men a spiritual fountain.

#### B. Judaism and Christianity meet.

Historians have well said that the seed of Christianity was planted in Jewish soil.<sup>19</sup> Christianity took root in a Jewish atmosphere and was propagated largely by men of the Jewish nationality. Therefore it is not unnatural to believe that Christianity embodied much of the religious character of Judaism. Glover calls the death of Jesus, the final cleavage of Christianity from Judaism.<sup>20</sup> Two groups thus arose to affect pagan society, Jewish-Christians and the Gentile-Christians. To the loyal Jew, Christianity was intolerable.

To pagans, Christianity was but a religious extravagance—contemptible, indeed, but otherwise insignificant.

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<sup>19</sup> A. W. Nagler, The Church in History (Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1929), p. 393.

<sup>20</sup> T. R. Glover, Conflict of Religions in the Roman Empire (London: Methuen and Company, 1932), p. 167.

To the Jews, on the other hand, it was an object of hatred, which never stopped short of bloodshed when it possessed or could usurp the power and which, though long suppressed by circumstances, displayed itself in all the intensity of its virulence during the brief spasm of the dictatorship of Barcochba. Christianity was hateful to the Jews on every ground.<sup>21</sup>

Reasons for such antagonism are apparent. (1) Christianity seemingly nullified Jewish Law; (2) Liberated by the Christians, the Gentiles were free from the yoke of the Mosaic Law; (3) Christianity rendered an attitude of indifference to many Jews to the institutions of Israel, and (4) the climax to this situation was that pagan minds were confounding Christianity with Judaism, in truth Judaism's bitterest antagonist.<sup>22</sup> A nation which had so long stood for the concept of monotheism could not now accept the doctrine of a "second God". It was incredible for the true Jew to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. In all, Judaism could no more accept Christianity than it could paganism and it spent much energy with view of destroying the new Faith. "The unbelieving Jew was a spiritual and a social danger to the Christian in every city of the East," Glover says.<sup>23</sup>

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21 F. W. Farrar, The Early Days of Christianity (New York: Columbian Publishing Co., 1891), p. 42.

22 Ibid, p. 43.

23 T. R. Glover, Op. cit., p. 169.



The converted Jew, on the other hand, also proved a great source of difficulty in the Christian community. This group maintained that for a Gentile to become a Christian, he must first become a Jew, observing the rite of circumcision and the ceremonial law. The solution to this Judaizing tendency caused the council to be held in A. D. 49, at Jerusalem.<sup>24</sup> Here the differences between the two tendencies were acknowledged and peaceful compromise agreed upon. Schaff says the results were twofold:

The Jews it left to their national form of religion, undisturbed in their observance of the law; and upon the heathen converts it placed no burdensome yoke, but only such requisitions as a regard for pure morality and the principles of Christian charity would lead them readily to fulfill. 25

The years from A. D. 50 to 65 witnessed the labors of Paul in the Gentile-Christian mission movement. Soon the event which severed all relations between Judaism and Christianity occurred in A. D. 70; namely, the destruction of Jerusalem; the Jewish theocracy was now crushed.

Judaism had fulfilled her mission. She had successfully planted the seed of moral and ethical conduct. The Apostles of Christianity took an independent stand before the world, challenging men with a new and vigorous faith.

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<sup>24</sup> Acts 15:6-29.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Schaff, History of Apostolic Church, p.620.

### C. Stoicism.

No portrayal of the forces which Christianity had to meet is complete without some adequate representation of the philosophical mode of thought of the era. For the purposes of our study we must pass the age in which the philosophies of the great souls of ethics and religion were vogue, and turn to the philosophies that emerged from an age of dissatisfaction and moral impassiveness. The two philosophies which thus grip our attention are the Epicurean and the Stoic, both the products of a desperate age.

Of the former we may say but a few well concluded facts. Certainly Epicureanism had no religious message and in fact its maxims were contradictory to any religious motive. When any philosophy attempts to resolve all good into pleasure it may expect defeat. This philosophy, which Fisher calls "practical atheism"<sup>26</sup>, spread rapidly and widely throughout the Empire but proved to be little but a disintegrating principle and what the historian Lecky has termed "the apology for vice".<sup>27</sup> The same author gives a striking epitome of Epicureanism:

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<sup>26</sup> G. P. Fisher, The Beginnings of Christianity (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1891), p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> W. E. H. Lecky, History of European Morals, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1876), Vol. I, p. 175.

The mission of Epicureanism was, therefore, chiefly negative. The anti-patriotic tendency of its teaching contributed to that destruction of national feeling which was necessary to the rise of cosmopolitanism, while its strong opposition to theological beliefs, supported by the genius and enthusiasm of Lucretius, told powerfully upon the decaying faith.<sup>28</sup>

In the study of Stoicism we must distinguish between its two forms. (a) The original system is represented by two men, Zeno and Chrysippus. (b) The latter is the modified Roman Stoicism of the first century of the Christian era, and such men as Seneca, Epictetus, Tacitus and Marcus Aurelius prove its ardent disciples.

The Stoicism founded by Zeno had for its logical principle much the same basis as the Epicureans, "but derived from them diametrically opposite moral conclusions." <sup>29</sup> Thus the Stoicism of Zeno professed a belief in a Supreme Being, although such a concept was couched in pantheistic conceptions. Matter and Deity being identical it would only follow that the universal Zeus is present in everything.

The theology of the Stoics was an ill-defined, uncertain and somewhat inconsistent Pantheism; the Divinity was especially worshipped under the two aspects of Providence and moral goodness, and the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>29</sup> E. De Pressense, The Ancient World and Christianity (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, n.d.) p. 399.

soul of man was regarded as a detached fragment of of the Deity or as at least pervaded and accompanied by a divine energy. 30

As inadequate as such conceptions may seem, the Stoics did oppose pagan deities and temples and this is no small advancement in thought. Plutarch states in part, "We know that the Stoics, holding to one immortal and indestructible God, think that the others have been born, and will perish." 31 And as late as the writings of the Stoic Seneca, the absurdity of the worship of images is manifest. "Not from gold, not from silver;" says Seneca, "from this material no image can be devised resembling God." 32

The soul, the original Stoic philosophy taught, was not immortal for it was corporeal. Lecky says the first doctrine was that the soul of man had a independent future, but not an eternal existence, though it was "to survive until the last conflagration which was to destroy the world, and absorb all finite things into the all-prevading soul of nature." 33 It is apparent that the human soul was considered to be a detachment from the

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30 W. E. H. Lecky, Op. cit., p. 198.

31 Plutarch, Plutarch's Works, 7, 654.

32 Seneca, Epist., 31, 10.

33 W. E. H. Lecky, Op. cit., pp. 182-83.

the Divine Source which must ultimately be reabsorbed by the parent Deity.

One wonders how such a philosophy that offered so little hope for immortality could maintain its position. But the fact that it expanded and spread throughout the Empire apart from this very important doctrine proves its intrinsic worth to the citizenry of the Empire. That there was much doubt and confusion concerning immortality in the minds of Stoic leaders is clearly manifest. The founder of Roman stoicism, Panaetius, held resolutely that the soul perished with the body, while Seneca contradicts himself repeatedly on the subject. <sup>34</sup>

The creed of Stoicism was certainly not emotional in nature, but in bare fact was to triumph over all emotion. Thus, no anger, no pity, no suffering nor indulgence, was perhaps the pure creed of a true Stoic. Its attempt was to arrive at complete insensibility and with the suppression of emotions there was ushered in the ascendancy of reason. To this, Lecky adds a second principle, namely, virtue as the sole legitimate object for the aspiration of men. <sup>35</sup>

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34 Loc. cit.

35 W. E. H. Lecky, Op. cit., p. 177.

Into the Roman world, corrupted and destitute of any spiritual or moral vitality, emerged Stoicism, a tried and proven philosophy. The deep scar of paganism stood open on the surface of the great Empire and the remedial power of Stoicism was now to be tried. T. R. Glover interprets the Stoic infusion into the Empire as one of great boon to Rome when he says in part, "they needed some foundation for life, some means of linking the individual to something that could not be shaken, and this they found in Stoicism." 36

There was, to be sure, a close affinity between Stoical morals and the old Roman character and perhaps this occasioned its success in making a prominent mark upon the citizenry. If Stoicism had taught nothing more than that man was capable of attaining an extremely high degree of moral excellence, it would have proven its worth to Rome. But coupled with this maxim the advocates of the philosophy taught men to fear nothing beyond the present life. Such contributions to Rome has made it possible to say, "Roman virtue found its highest expression in Stoicism." 37

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36 T. R. Glover, Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire (London: Methuen and Co., 1932), p. 37.

37 W. E. H. Lecky, Op. cit., p. 231.

Stoicism, even in its modified Roman form, contributed two cardinal principles to Roman society. The first in the practical realm, the determination to teach men how they should live, and secondly, Stoicism exalted the inward freedom of man. In essence, Lecky generalizes by saying, Stoicism "taught men to hope little, to fear nothing." <sup>38</sup> Nor would Stoicism compromise with prevailing philosophies for

in the midst of all these circumstances the Stoics taught a philosophy which was not a compromise, or an attempt to moderate the popular excesses, but which was rather in its austere sanctity the extreme antithesis of all that the prevailing examples and their own interests could dictate. <sup>39</sup>

Roman Stoicism departed from the rigid system of Zeno and imparted new concepts which marked its moderated form. Seneca's conception of God is that of a moral and spiritual Being, possessing personality, the secret power within man and the force within nature which constitutes the realm of order. <sup>40</sup>

We may say discernedly that Roman Stoicism sought to bring about a moral salvation in an Empire saturated with morbidity, largely by kindling aspirations within

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>40</sup> Seneca, Epist., 73, 16.

individual hearts <sup>41</sup> after a higher and purer religion. Furthermore, Stoicism brought the ethical principles of living into the sphere of the religious as had no other preceding society. <sup>42</sup> Realizing the callousness of its entire philosophy and the fatalism of its main precepts, we may affirm the statement:

....there is a grandeur in Roman Stoicism; for declamatory and theatrical as it sometimes is, it yet contrasts nobly with the abject life around it.<sup>43</sup>

Its contribution in the realm of magnanimous gestures was indeed exceptional. Lecky says in part, "Of all the forms of human heroism, it (Stoicism) is probably the most unselfish."<sup>44</sup> Stoicism advanced a cosmopolitan spirit based upon the teaching that it was the duty of each man to consecrate his life to the welfare of others. It also broke down class barriers and attempted to annihilate all national limitations placed upon any people.

What we must say for Stoicism, and principally Roman Stoicism, is that while it existed in a society destitute of moral mandates, bereft of all interests in civil and religious liberties and addicted to gross crimes,

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41 T. R. Glover, Op. cit., p. 65.

42 E. De Pressence, Op. cit., p. 443.

43 Ibid. p. 444.

44 W. E. H. Lecky, Op. cit., p. 178.



the Stoics maintained a comparatively lofty moral code. It is therefore not without cause that the historian calls the Stoic "the representative and sustainer of the past." 45

But moral reformation based on Stoic principles did not succeed in the main for a world corrupt and inculcated with rabid motives, continued in its detestable adoration of its own vices. When Roman Stoicism advocated suicide it measured its own life line for the doctrine proved to be the "culminating point of Roman Stoicism". 46 Such final utterances on the part of the Stoics lacked the inspiration of the truly noble life.

Its complete suppression of the emotions not only crushed evil passions but those of the most elevating nature also. It was a philosophy destitute of love and robbed man of sympathy and compassion. It took away the gentleness of nature and taught men to cherish a haughty spirit. It looked upon vice only with disdain and never cast a pathetic glance upon the manifest wickedness.

Stoicism was simply a school of heroes--it recognized no gradations of virtue or vice. It condemned all emotions, all spontaneity, all mingled motives, all principles, feelings and impulses upon which the virtue of common men mainly depend. It was capable of acting only on moral natures that were strung to the highest tension, and it was therefore naturally rejected by the multitudes. 47

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45 W.E.H. Lecky, Op. cit., p. 293.

46 Ibid, p. 222.

47 Ibid, p. 195.

Stoicism therefore did not capture and maintain her place within the range of thinking and experience of the ancient world. But upon posterity she left her mark, Christianity being no exception. Perhaps Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, exemplified stoic traditions when he passionately desired martyrdom. "I am willing to become God's wheat," Ignatius said, "ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may become pure bread of Christ." 48

#### D. The Mystery Religions.

A world which had grasped at every vague conception of religion, and which now found the aftermath of such liberal indulgence a wretchedness and misery indescribable, now turned to self-chastisement and the revelry of initiation rites for salvation and peace. Lietzmann points out that the religious tone of the Empire at this date was characterized by a falling away from the official religion with its ties to the community, family and the race.<sup>49</sup> Therefore it was the great anxiety about the soul's salvation which impelled men to resort to the mysteries.

The Mysteries stood for a religious knowledge and

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48 Ignatius, Epistle to Romans, v.

49 Hans Lietzmann, The Beginnings of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), I, p. 223.

and benefit which was accessible only through the rites of initiation.<sup>50</sup> The mysteries were characterized by religious values which took possession of the soul of the individual and concerned practical life and hope. The mysteries sought the attainment of purification, immortality and complete blessedness of life. In a depraved world such objectives appealed to man's deeper moral nature.

A sentimental religion, deriving from a sensuous mysticism, inspired hope of future life for the initiates, who as such, irrespective of their morality, were entitled to happiness in this world and bliss in the next, while those not initiate would fail of happiness here and sink in slime hereafter.

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We are aware of early mystery religions but mere reference to them as antecedents of the later cults must prove sufficient in this study. For our study we are interested in those mystery cults which impinge upon the Graeco-Roman world of the first three centuries of the Christian era. It may be said that the spread of such worship originated with the conquests of Alexander for no longer could civic or local worship satisfy the needs of men.

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<sup>50</sup> Henry C. Sheldon, The Mystery Religions and the New Testament (New York; Abingdon Press, 1918), p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> E. W. Hopkins, The History of Religions (New York: Macmillan Company, 1918), p. 502.

The mystery religions took great growth during the Hellenistic period and in the Roman era, "enriched themselves to an ever greater extent from the east." 52 Many earnest minded men had rejected the absurd religious movements which had presented themselves, but the personal form of the mysteries along with salvation they offered, appealed to such men. It was among such people that the eastern mysteries took root.

Our immediate study is concerned with those mysteries having their principal seat at Eleusis, those of Cybele at Phrygia, the Egyptian mystery-cult of Isis and Osiris, the Orphic brotherhoods and the Persian Mithraism which swept the Empire so mightily. Aware of Sheldon's caution regarding certain collective deductions derived from one or another of these mystery-cults<sup>53</sup>, we may nevertheless find generalities which characterize the mystery religions and such findings prove valuable to our study.

Viewed generally, the Mysteries appeared as voluntary brotherhoods rather than state institutions.<sup>54</sup>

The new communities were both a unity and an actual organization of a miraculous super-humanity: he who

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52 Hans Lietzman, Op. cit., p. 225.

53 H. C. Sheldon, Op. cit., p. 15.

54 Ibid., p. 23.

belonged to them felt himself to be lifted out of the multitude of his "profane" fellow-citizens, and to be placed in a secret relationship with the powers of the godhead. He had trodden a road which led out of this common world and its narrow confines into the spheres of the gods, and which at times brought the reality of that higher world into blissful consciousness. 55

Though the mysteries formed such fraternal groups it is the consensus of opinion that they did not provide their devotees with any body of moral or metaphysical instruction.<sup>56</sup> The initiation rite itself was often immoral with its orgy of strange ceremonies, intoxicating dances, flagellations and self-mutilation.

Another outstanding characteristic of the mysteries seen in their general cast was the fact that they leagued themselves with magic. Uhlhorn portrays this through Hippolytus's record:

Hippolytus gives a long list of these artifices, of the way the priests so contrived, that the doors of the temple opened of themselves, that at the moment when the flame of the sacrifice blazed upon the altar a mysterious music was heard, that majestic forms appeared in the altar-flames and the like; thus the novices really believed themselves perpetually surrounded with miracles. 57

One cannot minimize the affects of the mystery-

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55 Hans Lietzmann, Op. cit., pp. 223-24.

56 H. C. Sheldon, Op. cit., p. 24.

57 Gerhard Uhlhorn, The Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism, p. 323.

cults upon the Graeco-Roman world. Aside from the serious defaults of the mysteries, and their pure pagan characteristics, they are not void of some sublime qualities. De Pressense suggests a change in religious thinking which the mystery-cults ushered in:

The effect of these mysteries was to render religion more popular. The best inheritance in the future life was no longer reserved for heroes alone. Initiation established a sort of moral equality, which minimized differences of culture and descent. This was not the least of its benefits. As the mysteries of Eleusis opened to all the gate of the abode of the blessed, the ill-starred portion of mankind resorted to them to find compensation for the inequalities of the earthly life. 58

There remains the fact that the popular mystery religions all lacked serious moral and spiritual vigor so direly needed. The great Eleusinian mysteries reenacted the drama of Demeter and Persephone, portraying in all vividness possible the return of the soul from the clutches of death. The initiation was so impressive that it soon became standard to suppose that such rites established a close bond between the neophyte and the divinities who were being commemorated.

The festival of Cybele and Attis was celebrated during the spring months and the worship often resulted in uncontrollable orgies. The worship commemorated the

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58 E. De Pressense, The Ancient World and Christianity, p. 321.

the resurrection of Attis, husband of Cybele. Here was a glowing promise for the worshiper, for as Attis had been raised to life, so would each devotee. Incorporated with this mystery was the bloody taurobolium, a sacramental blood bath which united the novice with the gods.

The Orphic religion is distinguished by its moral earnestness. It was individualistic in its call, centering the thought upon the next life and calling men to union with the god Orpheus. It was a vagrant brotherhood challenging men with its doctrine of transmigration of the soul. It was a religion which saw the needs of men and with a realism which other mystery-cults had lacked.

The last to be mentioned is the Mithraism of Persia which infiltrated the Roman borders and swept the entire empire. The characteristics of Mithraism are unique. The god, Mithras, was represented as mediator, patron of soldier and consequent discipline implied, and a responsive benefactor of men. The one great limitation was the complete disregard for women. Regardless of the splendour it achieved in certain realms, Mithraism, it is said, was

the last embodiment of the pagan idea of deity before it went down forever in the brighter light of another religion from the East which was to supersede them all.<sup>59</sup>

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E. D. Sopher, The Religions of Mankind (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1938), p. 143.

### E. The Imperial Cult.

Augustus' era of religious reform was in essence a revival of ancient religious precepts of the Roman people. Indeed, the ruler-cult did not originate with Augustus, although certainly he did popularize it. Gibbon reminds us that such deification of emperors is the only instance in which the Romans departed from their customary prudence and modesty.<sup>60</sup> We may call this in question in view of the many seductive religious tendencies Rome had entertained to this point in her history. There now existed a coercive force, largely consisting of the intellectuals who looked with disdain upon the religion of the masses, to bring back some form of State worship. It now appears that ruler-worship was to be the final role within paganism,<sup>61</sup> and was to prove the real resistant force to Christianity.

The deifying of human beings is not indigenous to Roman thought but was deeply rooted in pagan conceptions. In his brilliant study, Sweet points out that

Whatever may be the reason for it, polytheists exhibit a spontaneous tendency to include great and powerful

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<sup>60</sup> Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., n. d.), I, pp. 68-69.

<sup>61</sup> L. M. Sweet, Roman Emperor Worship (Boston: R.G. Badger, 1919), p. 123.



human personalities among the objects of their worship.<sup>62</sup>

For our purpose we need but see the connection of such worship with the procession of other gods to appreciate its pagan associations. It was in Greek thought that men became divine through illustrious deeds. But the machinery for the deification of emperors was long established in Roman thought through veneration paid to ancestors, the *Di Manes* or *divi parentum*.<sup>63</sup> And in the sense that Augustus went back to a worship that was fertile to Roman emotion and thought, his rule ushered in a revival of ancient religion. To such a movement Augustus received not only support but deep gratitude.

Couple this with the fact that the Roman world now enjoyed peace, uniformity of government and law after some odd hundred years of anarchy and civil distress, and we see in some measure the reason for Augustus's success in establishing ruler-worship. To a populous lost in confusion the possibilities of divine kingship presented themselves and all were too eager to make Augustus a god upon earth. Cument witnesses to this fact:

The powerful chief who delivered his state from the scourge of invasion and ensured it peace and welfare

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62 Ibid., p. 38.

63 Ibid., pp. 45-46.

accomplished a work which seemed to be beyond the ability of man, and he was adored as a present god, praesens numen, a saviour. 64

It would seem germane to say at this point that the imperial cult, therefore, was largely a matter of public expression of gratitude for some benefit brought the citizenry. In truth apotheosis of the ruler was a popular gesture of acknowledgment put in religious terminology. 65

Emperor worship was established by Octavian Augustus in the year 42 B. C., when he compelled the Senate to declare the apotheosis of Julius Caesar. 66 Indeed Sweet calls Caesar the "first and determinative member of the new divi". 67 Thus Roman religion became focused upon the deified princeps and it was to be but a short time but that around Augustus a constellation of miraculous narratives were rapidly gathering. 68 The sequential movements took rapid stride: in 36 B. C. the gratitude of Italian municipalities gave Augustus a place in their temples. In 30 B. C. was inaugurated public

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64 Franz Cumont, After Life in Roman Paganism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), p. 112.

65 H.R. Willoughby, Pagan Regeneration (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), p. 18.

66 E. H. Marshall, Religious Backgrounds of Early Christianity (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1931), p. 71.

67 L. M. Sweet, Op. cit., p. 54.

68 W.E.H. Lecky, History of European Morals, i, p. 266.

celebration of his birthday and in 29 B. C. the Senate established the Augustan celebrations. In the year 12 B.C. Drusus dedicated an altar to "Roma et Augustus" near Lugdunum in Gaul. Here we note a continuous thread in Rome's developing religion, namely that the Roma-cult was closely united with the emperor-cult.

The Roma-cult is interlocked from the beginning with the imperial. There were temples of Dea Roma and Divus Iulius for Roman citizens at Ephesus and Nicaea and probably elsewhere. The worship of Roma was connected with that of the Augusti almost universally.<sup>69</sup>

The growth was rapid and there were but few provinces that did not participate in the worship of the emperor. The historian Tacitus informs us that the worship of Augustus began at Pergamon where the emperor cult and the worship of Roma were unified.<sup>70</sup>

Some scholars point out two striking facts concerning the imperial-cult worship: (a) Divine honors were not sought by emperors, but pressed upon them perhaps for political expediency and (B) that the divus became a new god added to the pantheon, whereas the living emperor was thought to be the reappearance of some well known deity.<sup>71</sup> Gibbon remarks, a regular custom was introduced, that on the disease of

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69 L. M. Sweet, Op. cit., p. 62.

70 C. Tacitus, Annals, iv, 37.

71 L. M. Sweet, Op. cit. p. 66.

every emperor who had neither lived nor died like a tyrant <sup>72</sup>, the senate by a solemn decree should place him in the number of the gods: and the ceremonies of his Apotheosis were blended with those of his funeral. <sup>73</sup>

In the worship of the emperor it was not the physical form of the magistrate himself, but his eternal divine creative essence, his "hypostatized spirit", or Genius that received worship. But Sweet points out that the worship of the genius was a frail barrier against personal worship and was inevitably to become pure idolatry. <sup>74</sup>

The crystallization of the imperial-cult into a great social and political cohesive force was an assured result. The ruler-cult always carried with it a great semblance of political unity, for by the ius divinum, worship was placed in the hands of state officials. <sup>75</sup> There was therefore introduced into the Mediterranean world a worship which was common to all provinces. Uhlhorn says with keenness,

Not one of the ancient deities could have secured a united worship, but all men did homage to the Caesar-gods. In their service there arose a unity of worship

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<sup>72</sup> Concerning men like Nero and Caligula, Gibbon says, "Conspirators attacked the person of the tyrant, without aiming their blow at the authority of the emperor." Edward Gibbon, Decline and Fall of Roman Empire, i, p. 71.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>74</sup> L. M. Sweet, Op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

entirely unknown to former times. Thus it came to pass that the worship of the Emperors eclipsed all other worships. 76

Though we are cautioned on overstressing this principle of unification we know that one great defect of provincial administration of the Empire had been that few means had been advanced for such provincials to express their views to the central government. This was now largely met by the establishment of the concilia, a representative body which met to celebrate the worship of the emperor. The universal cult now was ready for absorption by the barbarians in the north, Egypt in the South and Syria in the East.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, we are told that it is not too much to say that the only deity equally well known and worshiped in every locality of the Empire was the emperor.<sup>78</sup>

It was the attempt to enforce conformity to the emperor-worship which was ultimately to divide the empire, for the crowning conflict between paganism and Christianity arose in direct connection with the worship of the emperor. Sweet gives a vivid description of the contrast between the

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76 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism, p. 85.

77 F. H. Marshall, Op. cit., p. 71.

78 L. M. Sweet, Op. cit., p. 89.

final pagan attempt at worship and the great splendor of Christendom:

For words which but reveal the pitiful human weakness, the absurdity and the baseness of the greatest of the Caesars, when applied to Christ, are like the cluster of jewels which belong to the sunlight to which they add nothing, but from which they gather and reflect, 79  
unimaginable splendors.

Thus, though the worship of the mperor may have strengthened paganism by giving it a common center and unifying diversified forms of heathenism, it nevertheless permitted common men to see what the gods were to whom temples were erected and homage paid. It was born to failure and could maintain its stability only through governmental edict and credulity of pagan people.

For a while the cult of the emperors was a real religion for many a resident of the Roman Empire. In the long run, however, it was impossible to maintain warm religious feeling towards a succession of men who had so little divine in them. Consequently the imperial cultus became gradually, like the cult of the Capitoline triad, a convention, a formula, a tradition, an abstraction and not a religion. 80

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79 L. M. Sweet, Op. cit. p. 142.

80 M. I. Rostevtziff, Mystic Italy (New York: H.H. Holt and Company, 1927), p. 108.

### F. Impact of Christianity upon Paganism.

Hitherto we have said little of the Christian movement and at this stage only a few preliminary statements are pertinent to our study. But the fact that the Christian movement was rapidly converging upon the capitol of the Empire is evident, for at the close of the first century one-twentieth of the total population of the city were Christians.<sup>81</sup> That we must reckon with the study of Christendom here is obvious from the fact that after decades of persecution, Christianity emerged triumphant, with not only several million loyal disciples, but also an emperor as patron.

We have shown to this point the existing religions and philosophies that gripped the ancient world. It is difficult to comprehend the distinctions between the vagueness offered by such religious cults and the high moral and spiritual tone of the new Christian movement. The fact that Christianity was not a religion which would coexist alongside of heathen religions was the source of irritation and conflict. Christianity's very claim to Divine revelation and the supernatural demanded her pre-

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<sup>81</sup> Gibbon's conservative estimate is that the numerical strength of Christianity at this date was at 50,000. Edward Gibbon, Op. Cit., p. 575.

eminence in the realm of religion. We shall see in a subsequent chapter that her very uniqueness separated her from the vast number of religious cults so prevalent in that ancient world. Had Christianity remained a Judaistic sect it would doubtless have suffered no agonies, but the fact that it claimed universal dominion caused the resentment and rabid hatred.

A new religion for a single nation might have given no offense. It would have been recognized, as were so many heathen cults, and monotheistic Judaism as well. But a universal religion could not be thus allowed. The conflict was for nothing less than dominion of the world.

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A multi number of reasons for the intense hatred of the Christian are available. Yet the prime objection to Christianity, from the view of the Roman patriot, was that the new movement was seemingly anti-national and therefore looked upon as a dangerous faction in the State. Tertullian states in quite bold terms, "Nothing is more foreign to us than public affairs."<sup>83</sup> Certainly every Christian spurned the worship at national altars, boldly refused to strew incense to the emperor or take oath by his genius, and held himself aloof from public games.

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<sup>82</sup> Gerhard Uhlhorn, Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism, p. 218.

<sup>83</sup> Tertullian, Apology, 38.



For the Christian's denial of the State religion; for his "tampering with domestic relations" and his aggressive character<sup>84</sup> and in all, his intense hatred of all that characterized paganism, the Christian met with foul abuse and wretched persecution. Marshall says,

The conflict was inevitable. Both Christianity and the Empire claimed world-wide dominion. Christ and the Emperor could not both be the supreme Lord. <sup>85</sup>

In somewhat close sequence, Christians suffered martyrdom under Nero; under Domitian (A. D. 81), who kept the Christians in a constant state of alarm; Trajan, under whom Ignatius was martyred; Hadrian (117-138); Antonius Pius, during whose reign Polycarp was martyred; the Stoic, Marcus Aurelius despised Christianity and his reign saw Justin Martyr beheaded and the slave girl, Blandina tortured; Severus; Decius, who set a new wave of violence in motion; Gallus; Valerian; and finally Diocletian whose attempt to crush Christianity through public slaughter, only brought a sympathetic reaction from the heathen. <sup>86</sup>

Only two of these persecutions were in any sense

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<sup>84</sup> F. H. Marshall, Op. cit., pp. 271-73.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

generally aimed at the suppression of the Church, namely those under Decius and Diocletian. Many of the others were outbreaks of personal tyranny and cruelty and to a more detailed account of such reaction we shall turn at a later point in our study.

What, we may ask, made the Christian so tenacious in holding to the Faith? If we answer this, we in the main answer the question as to the cause of the rapid growth of the Christian Church. Gibbon's classic causes are: (a) The inflexible and intolerant zeal of the Christians. (b) The doctrine of a future life "improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth." (c) The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church. (d) The pure and austere morals of the Christians. (e) The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which was gradually finding an independent and increasing state in the Roman empire's national life.<sup>87</sup>

Other reasons are apparent for the success of primitive Christianity. One of the chief of these was the penetration of Christianity into the synagogues, for here the Christian message could be planted. Could there

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Edward Gibbon, Op. cit., p. 431.

be a more likely place for the propagation of the Christian message than in those centers where the Hebrew Scriptures were known and revered?

G. Summary.

We have attempted to portray the various religions and philosophies so prevalent in the ancient world and how they contributed to the Christian movement. It is apparent that the existence of such movements manifests a deep seated dissatisfaction with the status quo. Our attempt has been to portray the development in its proper chronological sequence, first manifesting the attributes of Judaism, Stoicism, mysteries, imperial cultus and finally the impact of Christianity upon a pagan atmosphere.

Certainly it is evident that Christianity appeared on a scene thoroughly acted upon by pagan forces. That Christianity could originate, develop and progress in such an atmosphere has been made apparent. We shall now investigate trials and persecutions Christianity underwent.

## CHAPTER IV

### POINTS OF TENSION

A movement with the universal destiny which Christianity possessed was inevitably to meet the sword of the opponent. Throughout the span of the first three centuries Christian martyrs' blood flowed freely. Christendom became antagonistic to pagan centers in every precept, and when mere disregard for the new movement failed to suppress the intense interest of a soul-starved populace, heathenism resorted to every atrocious act known to extirpate Christianity.

Our task in this portion of our study is to investigate the early protection afforded primitive Christianity as it appeared, to the pagan mind, under the guise of Judaism. We find it thus necessary to give some short account of the final separation of Christianity from Judaism and the subsequent trial which Christianity passed through as an illegal religio. But it is also essential to know that the attack on the Christian movement took place not only through fire and rack, but through acute literary attacks, led by that of Celsus.

Finally we shall turn to a study of the charge of treason as leveled against the Christians, thereby pro-

ducing an inquiry into the relationship between the Roman State and the Christian conscience.

A. Primitive Christianity recognized as a sect of Judaism.

To this point we have witnessed the religions and philosophies which Rome entertained and liberally tolerated that it might in some measure pacify the civil needs of a troubled populace. Uniquely placed in the midst of such a pagan environment, with its rapidly changing deities, was the exclusive Jewish group. Its characteristics distinctly marked the Jewish citizen dwelling in the land of diverse religions. Uhlhorn observes that the Jew's adroitness at putting himself at the service of the government in power <sup>1</sup>, along with their wealth, procured for them an important series of privileges. <sup>2</sup>

It is a singular fact that during the early growth of our great Christian movement, Judaism acted as her protecting sheath. As long as Christianity was deemed a mere sect of Judaism, it enjoyed the protection and the privileges that the Roman government extended to the Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> At heart they were unfriendly to any state which showed indifference to Jewish claims.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Uhlhorn, Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), p. 84.

While such protection and toleration was given Judaism, the primitive Christian brotherhoods, which continually passed for Jewish associations with the Roman officials, remained unmolested. The Christian group, though extremely antagonistic to the pagan ideals of the Roman state, enjoyed the right of assembly and to some measure the toleration of their refusal to worship the national deities, so long as they held their social status as Jews. Thus we may feel certain that as long as Christianity appeared within the socially recognized unit of Judaism, it continued to enjoy much of the immunity, freedom of worship and conduct that the Roman authorities conceded to the Jewish faith.<sup>3</sup>

Christianity, even five years later than this (the death of Claudius), was regarded at Rome as a part of Judaism; and this being assumed, there was no foreign religion save Judaism and no native one either, which was engaged in public teaching. No religion save monotheism was gaining ground. <sup>4</sup>

Pagan ignorance thus shrouded the era of the rapid growth of early Christianity. We may be sure that it was not Judaism that was actively engaged in an aggressive missionary campaign, but rather the Christian brotherhoods.

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<sup>3</sup> S. J. Case, The Social Triumph of the Ancient Church (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1933), p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> F. Huidkoper, Judaism at Rome (New York: James Miller, 1882), p. 226.

It was Gibbon who said, "The Jewish religion was admirably fitted for defense, but it was never designed for conquest."<sup>5</sup> The early Christian converts carried a passion upon their bosom which the loyal Jew no longer experienced.

Though bitter antipathy existed between Judaism and Christianity, the resemblances were so keen that the pagan mind caught no glimmer of differentiation, indeed, he sought none. The exclusiveness and non-social basis of the Jewish and Christian societies distinguished them from the heathen environment. Their mutual zeal for religious truth and the unity of God; the resultant product of an ardent theistic faith, high morality, marked both social groups; and the divine authority assigned the body of holy Scriptures, all manifest a common ground of allegiance. When Judaism settled down, content to be left unmolested and to win but few proselytes, paganism likewise seemed to grow complacent. But Christianity was not so effected for she carried on missionary activities hitherto unequalled and unknown, regardless of the impending forfeiture of such privileges as the Jewish community may have enjoyed.

There is quite divergent thought on the part of

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., n.d.), i, 434.

scholarship as to when the Roman government ceased to regard Christianity as a sect of Judaism. Ramsay, at some length, refutes the view that Christianity was not recognized as a separate movement until as late as A. D. 95. <sup>6</sup> He observes:

It seems almost as absurd to say that the Imperial policy treated Christians until 95 under the mistaken idea that they were Jews, as it would be for some historian of future ages to argue that the British Government continued until the twentieth century to mix up the Brahma Samaji with Brahminism. <sup>7</sup>

It would seem on the other hand, and this is the evidence of historians, that the Christians were distinguished as early as A. D. 64. Indeed, when Tacitus asserts that Nero carried out persecution against "persons commonly called Christians" and elaborates somewhat by giving mention to one "Christus", put to death under Pontius Pilate, it seems ample proof that Christians were so recognized and known as early as July of A. D. 64. <sup>8</sup>

We need not limit our evidence for the protection of early Christianity to such secular sources. Throughout the Book of Acts, which breaks off roughly at A. D. 62,

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<sup>6</sup> W. M. Ramsay, The Church in the Roman Empire (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893), p. 267.

<sup>7</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>8</sup> C. Tacitus, Annals, xv, 44.



the attitude of the Romans to Christians is noticeably favorable. Paul and Silas at Philippi are condemned, not as Christians, but as Jews.<sup>9</sup> Though the Apostle Paul was a prisoner at Rome, it was only as the activity of the Jews against him and as the result of his own appeal to Caesar.

Though Judaism acted as the protectorate of the early Christian movement, it nevertheless despised all popularly reckoned associations with it. The portrayal of this is no clearer given than in Luke's account of Jewish hostility to the work of the apostle Paul.<sup>10</sup>

Christians were intolerable when thought harmful to the state. Ramsay makes the assertion that the Flavian policy (A. D. 69) toward Christianity was political and not religious.<sup>11</sup> Christianity was apparently viewed as disloyalty to the state and as such must be reckoned with for the safety and welfare of the social group. Hence when Christianity was looked upon as a superstitio and not as another religion, it was intensely hated. The entire movement was regarded as hostile to the order of the state, and therefore subject to all the foul abuse a pagan world could initiate.

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9 Acts 16:20.

10 Acts 18:13.

11 W. M. Ramsay, Op. cit., p. 274.

## B. Separation from Judaism.

For lucidity of thought in viewing the utter separation of the Church from the Synagogue, we find it a distinct contribution to briefly survey James Orr's suggestions regarding the developing stages in the conflict between Judaism and Christianity.<sup>12</sup> (a) Culminating with the martyrdom of Stephen, the first stage manifests an unbroken unity with Jewish institutions.<sup>13</sup> (b) The founding of the Gentile Church extends from the stoning of the first martyr up to the Apostolic Conference. (c) The final era, commencing with the Council which convened at Jerusalem and ending at the conclusion of the apostolic age, marks the great controversy between Jew and Gentile.

By no means are we to understand that the schism between the two bodies was the result of an immediate, singular event. The hostility of the Palestinian Jew toward the Lord is evidence of an early antagonism. Again it was Stephen's fervent preaching that brought the wrath of Jewish magistrates against him. And by no small degree is Peter's vision and subsequent intercourse with Cornelius an effectual power in the break between the two elements.

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<sup>12</sup> James Orr, The History and Literature of the Early Church (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933), pp. 23-28.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 2:46.

Of great consequence to Gentile missions is the great work of the apostle Paul. Prior to his conversion (between A. D. 35 and 37) the Rabbi Saul's bitter abhorrence of Christianity was clearly manifest. Yet after the Lord had touched his perplexed heart, no man had more moral stamina in the opposition of the ceremonial law than did Paul. No single individual had as much to do with the founding of the Gentile-Christian Church than did this Apostle. Philip Schaff points out that Paul's work was the medium through which the threatened schism came to a head:

Paul's successful propagation of the Gospel among the Gentiles, which was the main seal of his apostleship, threatened to produce a schism in the church itself, between the two leading communities of Jerusalem and Antioch, and, in general, between the believers of the circumcision and those of uncircum-<sup>14</sup>cision.

The issue with Paul was clearly between Christ and the ritualistic ceremony. It was his emphasis upon salvation dependent entirely upon faith in Christ which caused fellow workers to look with displeasure upon his work. The work of the Apostolic Conference in A. D. 52, calmed the existing rivalry to some extent. But in its end results was little more than a compromise, allowing

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Schaff, History of the Apostolic Church (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1864), p. 245.

to the Gentiles an exemption from the ceremonial law which the Judaizers would have laid upon them. This victory, if it is properly interpreted as such, was largely due to the efforts of the apostle Paul.

Regardless of the antecedent movements, the complete emancipation of Christianity was not effected until 70 A. D. This marks the date Titus triumphantly marched into Jerusalem, leaving the Temple in flames and thus outwardly destroying all tangible existence of Jewish national life. Without such a center as the Temple for a rallying point, Jewish national interest disintegrated rapidly.

No longer was Christianity viewed by the pagan mind as a movement within Judaism. Lietzmann reminds us that the separation attracted and actually recruited pagans.<sup>15</sup> The heathen saw within the Christian faith a new and powerful movement, gaining momentum with great rapidity.

Henceforth they (the Christians) were recognized by the heathen as a genus tertium, as they were often called—a third party beside Heathenism and Judaism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hans Lietzman, The Founding of the Church Universal (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), ii, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 254.

### C. Christianity under Trial.

Christianity from its very beginning was to meet the rebuff of a hostile world. Not only were false accusations leveled against Christians but bitter persecution as well. Eusebius records ten major persecutions but in general the persecution of Christians falls into two main divisions. The first era of persecution, extending through the first two and a half centuries, is largely local and sporadic. The second, chronologically extending from the middle of the third century until the reign of Constantine, witnesses an attempt by several rulers to completely annihilate the rapidly growing Church.

The first generation of Christians bore the tortures of the Neronian persecution. According to Tacitus, Nero accused the new sect, popularly nicknamed Christians, as the author of the conflagration which gutted Rome in A. D. 64.<sup>17</sup> Eagerly the Christians were sought out, hurried on to trial and there under torture untrue confessions made in moments of weakness which were to harry the entire Christian group. The result is witnessed in uniform description by historians as bloodshed ascended

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17 C. Tacitus, Annals, xv, 44.

upon Rome. The punishment of the Christians, "haters of the human race" <sup>18</sup>, provided amusement to divert the populace. Christian women were made to personate the Danaids and Dirces; frequently Christians were made to play the part of Actaeon torn by his dogs <sup>19</sup>; while at night human torches dispelled the darkness for pagan festivities. Certainly Christianity and organized paganism had now collided.

Not until the reign of Domitian do we again witness evidences of the continuance of the persecution. Ramsay places this great persecutor along with Nero.<sup>20</sup>

So strong and early a tradition as that which constitutes Domitian the second great persecutor cannot be discredited without wrecking the foundations of ancient history. <sup>21</sup>

Under Trajan's reign the rage of the populace broke out against the Christians and some more formal treatment of the Christians was found necessary. Evidence of the growing Christian movement is given us in Pliny the Younger's letter to Trajan in which he complains of the spread of the new religion and the consequent desertion of the pagan temples and interruption of the

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18 C. Tacitus, Annals, xv, 44.

19 W. M. Ramsay, The Church in Roman Empire, p. 234.

20 Ibid, p. 256.

21 Ibid, p. 259.

sacrificial ritual. As proconsul of Bithynia, Pliny wrote to the Emperor requesting information regarding the treatment of the members of this new religion. That such correspondence was necessary to civil administration and imperial policy is manifest:

The imperial policy ruled absolutely in the provinces, and the emperors, though not present, were consulted before even slight modifications of the general rules were made. The representatives who governed provinces were not viceroys but merely deputies. This fact is very important in our present subject: the policy throughout the empire towards the Christians was moulded by the wishes and views of the reigning Emperor. 22

Pliny asks questions of the Emperor as to whether he should respect age or sex, or treat all with the same measure of persecution; if he should pardon those who recanted; and was the fact that a man bore the "Name" ground for condemnation? Trajan's answer was not positive but arbitrary in its measure. (1) The Christians were not to be sought out, yet (2) when accused and convicted they must be properly punished and (3) penitence merits pardon if shown by future compliance with the rites of Roman religion. 23

During the reign of Hadrian (A. D. 117-138) we

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22 W. M. Ramsay, Op. cit., p. 209.

23 Ibid., p. 212.

During this reign we have the martyrdom of Justin, the torture and death of Blandina the slave girl and the torture of the boy Ponticus. The debauchery continued and none were to escape the trial:

Since there were Roman citizens among the accused, the legate sent for orders from Rome; and, by command of the Emperor, the Roman citizens died by the sword, while the rest were thrown to the wild beasts; from far and near the heathen flocked together to this spectacle. 26

Under Septimius Severus indictments against Christians and executions of the accused increased greatly. In Alexandria, Origen's father was executed and young Origen sought the same fate, only to be saved through the discretion of his mother.<sup>27</sup> At Carthage the notable martyrdom of Perpetua is related.

With the advent of Decius in A. D. 249, we have the first order for a general persecution. In an effort to restore the old Roman religion, the emperor issued an edict in the year 250 A. D. requiring all Christians to perform the rites of the religion of the Roman state. Uhlhorn observes at this point that the civil administrators, who had turned Christian during the era of peace, the citizens who feared for their business and the

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26 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., pp. 295-96.

27 Eusebius, Eccles. Hist., vi, 2.



wealthy now made haste to renounce Christianity.<sup>28</sup> Special names were created to designate the group who renounced the faith, those who sacrificed (sacrificati), those who offered incense (thurificati) and those who had merely pretended they had offered the sacrifices (acta facientes).<sup>29</sup> Many did not apostatise but submitted to the tortures so ingenuously wrought by the heathen. Numerous examples of Christian heroism are testimonial to the tenacity with which men held to the Faith. Christians met the scorn of the pagan populace and were insulted, stoned and beaten by the mobs. In public prisons they were abused and tortured:

Laden with chains, their arms and legs stretched on the rack; not only were the ordinary tortures employed, but the crushing of the fingers, the dislocation of the limbs, the tearing of the flesh with nails and hooks, but the most refined and novel tortures were invented. The prisoners were exposed to the most intense heat, and left to thirst for days; they were burned with fire, with charcoal and red-hot irons. We are told that some were stripped, smeared over with honey, and exposed to the stings of the insects. 30

Valerian (254-260 A. D.) attempted to accomplish the objective of extirpating Christianity without bloodshed, but his regulations soon proved without effect.

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28 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 367.

29 James Orr, Op. cit., p. 133.

30 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 371.

His second edict called for the execution of all clerical leaders of the Christian Church; Christians were stripped of all property and executed in like manner as the clergy if they persisted in the faith; and the Christian women were banished.

Bishop Sixtus of Rome was at once beheaded in the catacombs where he was celebrating the Lord's Supper; Cyprian was arraigned, confessed to be an official in the Christian Church and was likewise immediately beheaded.

It was not again until the rule of Diocletian (284-313 A. D.) that persecution overtook the Christians. For some nineteen years this Emperor refrained from molesting the Christians but suddenly his policy changed and in 303 he sent a detachment of soldiers to demolish the beautiful church in the city of the imperial residence. His first edict was aimed at the Church and the Scriptures rather than the individual Christians. The second edict published in the same year, ordered all Christian clergy to be thrown into prison. The third decree from imperial quarters required the clergy, now in prison, to offer sacrifice. The last decree, A. D. 304, extended the law to the entire body of Christians. This edict started a persecution which far surpassed

any yet put in force. Most fearful tortures were inflicted upon Christians, while only a pinch of incense strewn before the Emperor was sufficient for release. The cruelty of the pagan tortures are manifest throughout the accounts of this final persecution- Christians slowly burned to death; mutilated torsos; flogging; while Christian maidens were not infrequently exposed to the lust of the licentious pagan. The great Tertullian challenges the pagan-

Torture us, rack us, condemn us, rush us; your cruelty only proves our innocence. That is why God suffers us to suffer all this. Yes, but lately, when you condemned a Christian girl to the pander rather than the panther, you admitted that we count an injury to our chastity more awful than any penalty, than any death. But nothing whatever is accomplished by your cruelties, each more exquisite than the last. It is the bait that wins men for our school. We multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is shed.<sup>31</sup>

This soon became evident to the rulers, and on his death-bed, Galerius, successor to Diocletian, issued the remarkable edict of A. D. 311 which put an end to the persecution.<sup>32</sup> It was now confessed that persecution had not the power to stop the growth of the Christian Church and that any judicial action in opposition to Christianity was insufficient.

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31 Tertullian, Apologeticus, I, 12, 13.

32 Eusebius, Eccles. Hist., viii, 17.

D. Celsus and his refutation of Christianity.

Not only were persecutions instigated against early Christianity, but an intense literary attack as well. This opposition was initiated by Celsus, whose infamous treatise, A True Discourse, comes to us from the era shortly after the reign of Marcus Aurelius, or approximately 180 A. D. Glover says, "Celsus's general references to Christianity and to paganism imply that period."<sup>33</sup> It is apparent that Celsus' main objective is the protection and welfare of the Roman state. The passive hostility of the Christian group within the Empire's borders was quite enough to draw the bitter attack.

Celsus was satisfied with the established order, alike in regions of thought and of government. He mistrusted new movements—not least when they were so conspicuously alien to the Greek mind as the new superstition that came from Palestine. He has all the ancient contempt of the Greek for the barbarian, and, while he is influenced by the high motive of care for the state, there are traces of irritation in his tone which speak of personal feeling. The folly of the movement provoked him. <sup>34</sup>

With brevity we may examine Celsus' position. His polemical work against Christianity opens with the intro-

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<sup>33</sup> T. R. Glover, Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire, p. 240.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

duction of a Jew and the alleged combat between Judaism and Christianity. He then proceeds on a purely personal basis to slander Christianity from the standpoint of its philosophical mode of thought. It would appear that everything in Christianity was offensive to him. His bitter hatred for our Lord is expended in bold and impious language, regarding Christ as a charlatan and pretender. He ascribes Christ's miracles to the credulity of the people and compares them to ancient feats of magic. In part he accounts for Christ thus:

Through poverty he went to Egypt and worked there as a hired labourer; and there he became acquainted with certain powers on which the Egyptians pride themselves, and he came back holding his head high on account of them, and because of them he announced that he was God. 35

Uhlhorn says that the root of the hatred which Celsus had for Christianity was to be found in the fact that the Deity worshiped by the Christians was a sinner's God and thus Christianity was basically a religion for the poor and underprivileged.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore Celsus attacks the Christian faith on the grounds of what he asserts is its anthropocentric-

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35 Origen, Against Celsus, i, 28.

36 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 300.

ism. He charges that the Christians say that God made all things for man and that man is the special object of His care. It is Celsus' prime argument that the world has no purpose and hence the fundamental doctrines of Christianity stand in direct opposition to all that he might assert.

The literary attack on Christianity manifests an early recognition of an influential and growing religion. It will also ultimately show that within the realm of philosophy Christianity was to triumph as the Christian apologists took to the defense of the Faith.

#### E. Charges of Treason.

Roman government was founded upon theocratic principles and consequently the citizenry found it to be its duty to honor the national gods. We have seen the movement of religions and philosophies which spanned the history of the Empire to this point. We have also witnessed the culmination of such theocratic tendencies in the establishment of the worship of the Emperor. It was not until Christianity appeared to be a menace to the supremacy of the imperial regency, to the religion of the state, that official opposition was initiated.

To all alike the final test of loyalty to the

Roman state and the Emperor was the offering of incense to the imperial image. It was at this point that Christianity refused to bow. The conflict was thus between the worship of Divus Imperator and Christus Dominus.<sup>57</sup> The former appears to be the epitome of all that paganism could offer to a spiritually hungry world. It was but a matter of time when alert heathen minds saw the folly and absurdity of the former worship in the light of the magnanimity of the latter. But in the interim of time the conflict continued.

There is the same centrality of position in each case, the same solitary preeminence, the same ascriptions of heavenly power and glory. The similarity here is startling. There is no phraseology of devotion which the Christian could apply to Christ,--Lord, Saviour, Son of God, God,-- which has not been applied to the Caesars, and to their predecessors in royalty of other times in faraway lands. But there the resemblance ends. 38

Therefore Christians found it utterly impossible to honor the divine Emperor. To the extent that Christianity was hostile to the worship of the Emperor it was considered anti-nationalistic for such irreverence violated basic state principles. But the converse was equally true, for should any Christian bow to the emperor

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37 L. M. Sweet, Roman Emperor Worship (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1919), p. 141.

38 Ibid., p. 142.

he would be recanting his faith in Christ.

The polarity of worship is illustrated in bold lines in the Martyrdom of Polycarp. Here we see a captain of the Roman guard attempting to persuade the aged Polycarp: "But what harm is it to say, Lord Caesar, and to offer sacrifice, and so forth, and to be saved?"<sup>39</sup> Steadfastly Polycarp refused and was subjected to more pleas: "Respect your age...swear by the genius of Caesar, repent, say, 'Away with the Atheists', take oath and I let you go, revile Christ."<sup>40</sup> To all this faithful Polycarp answered, "For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"<sup>41</sup>

This then was the character of the conflict, either blaspheme the deity of the empire or profane the holy name of Christ. The issue was clear cut, on one hand an abject worship based on credulity and on the other a lofty theism.

#### F. Unrest among the Roman citizenry.

It is abundantly manifest that there existed among

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39 Martyrdom of Polycarp, viii, 2.

40 Ibid., ix, 2,3.

41 Ibid., ix, 3.



the intelligentsia of the Roman Empire, an astute spirit of dissatisfaction. The pretentious religions and varying philosophies instituted in Roman civic and political life, with the corresponding knavish and atrocious acts of the priests, brought only disheartened jeers from the higher social stratum. While the magicians and pseudo-priests took advantage of the incredulity of the people, the educated class found all the gods wanting.

The very fact that competent historians agree that the Roman rabble merely clamoured for bread and games gives us the assurance that any move away from the status quo must come from the group of the higher social position. Ramsay expresses belief that it was toward the end of the first century that many Roman nobles with a philosophic interest looked with anticipation to the doctrines of the Jews and Christians and of the East in general.<sup>42</sup> At another point this author observes:

The Christian religion spread at first among the educated more rapidly than among the uneducated; nowhere had it a stronger hold than in the household and at the court of the emperors. 43

Perhaps the greatest affinity with current philosophical thought and Christianity was at the point

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<sup>42</sup> W. M. Ramsay, The Church in the Roman Empire, p. 272 .

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

of its assertion of the rights of the individual against and above that of an absolute despotic power. Again, the utter repugnance which the Roman noble displayed to the abyss of depravity in which Rome had sunk, marked a peculiar similarity to the Christian's hatred of such.

Surely Seneca's writings, coming directly from this period of time, manifest a lofty specimen of ethical thought which Orr terms "the most singular approximations in sentiment and expression to the new ideas introduced by Christianity."<sup>44</sup> In confirmation of this view, Super generalizes:

It is easy to extract from his writings a complete code of morals, a breviary of human conduct, that would differ but little from that contained in the New Testament. He is a conspicuous example of the heathen of whom Paul says, they are without excuse. But while Seneca is not a seeker after God he can with justice be called a seeker after Christ. He is an earnest inquirer after the peace that passeth understanding; after that serene confidence that sustained the greatest and the least of the Apostles, and the noble army of martyrs no less. He lacks that Christian enthusiasm that comes only through faith in a living Christ and in His atonement. <sup>45</sup>

It is not our task to present the laborious thesis on the supposed conversion of Seneca by the great Apostle

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<sup>44</sup> James Orr, Neglected Factors in the Study of the Early Progress of Christianity (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), p. 175.

<sup>45</sup> C. W. Super, Between Heathenism and Christianity (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1899), p. 24.

Paul, but let it suffice to say that it seems a common opinion that Seneca had no personal contact with Paul. The fact remains that both were great moral reformers and Orr calls our attention to the fact that regardless how we account for such a change, at the time of Seneca's literary activity, Stoicism assimilated a warmer and more tender spirit which thereafter continuously animates it.<sup>46</sup> We are warned in the words of De Pressense that altogether too frequently men have "ably strung together the pearls of the Stoic philosophy, in order to show that the Gospel is to be found in Seneca."<sup>47</sup>

To be sure, the philosophy of Seneca produced in his voluminous literary work carried the thought of men to the very boundry line of Christendom. His moral sentiment deeply deplored the free gratification of pagan lust. In the monograph sent to Lucilius, De Providentia, Seneca writes:

Fless from pleasure, from that urmanly felicity in which the active powers of the mind grow torpid, unless something intervenes to recall man's lot, by a sort of perpetual intoxication. 48

We are given further account in Tacitus's writings

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46 James Orr, Op. cit., p. 181.

47 E. De Pressence, The Ancient World and Christianity, p. 448.

48 Seneca, De Providentia, iv, 8.

of the penetration of Christianity into the higher circles. The historian relates how, as early as A. D. 57, a lady of eminence, Pomponia Graecina, was tried and ultimately acquitted on the charge of "embracing a foreign superstition", but "lived to a great age, and in unintermitted sorrow."<sup>49</sup> No commenting source doubts but what the superstition referred to was Christianity.

#### G. Summary.

Our attention in this chapter has been concentrated upon primitive Christianity as it sought and gained a position of eminence and was then placed under fiery trial. The very nature of Christianity aroused the antagonism of the pagan environment and the only apparent and possible charge, that of treason, was placed upon the Faith.

The very fact that Christianity drew such attention in political, religious and literary realms places her in a unique position. Her claims were not only propagated by her foe, but the fidelity of each professing Christian under trial witnessed to a deep and firm conviction of the truth and reality of the Christian faith. It manifests one great truth, Christianity could not be conquered or brought to submission by sword or pen.

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49 C. Tacitus, Annals, xiii, 32.

## CHAPTER V

### CHRISTIANITY TRIUMPHANT

In the preceding study we have portrayed the environment into which Christianity came and her struggle for existence against the oppression of hostile forces. We shall here undertake to depict the triumph of the early Christian movement in four spheres; the philosophical, the political, the religious and the ethical. It is apparent that if Christianity was to ultimately win a place in the Empire it must succeed in implanting its Gospel in each realm.

#### A. Triumph of Christianity in the Philosophical Realm.

We have already taken brief survey of the literary attack of paganism upon Christianity. To speak only of those early men who pursued with unrelentless vigor the attack upon Christianity, we encounter the names of Celsus, Lucian and Fronto of Cirta. On the other hand, Christianity owes much to a strong literary band whose writings of the second and third centuries did much to bring about the ultimate victory.

James Orr suggests that the very appearance of the apologists at this time marked an era of distinct advancement for Christianity for (a) it now pushed itself into

the literary circles and (b) manifested a new spirit of self-confidence. <sup>1</sup> A literary defense of the fundamental principles of Christianity now not only proved a threatening power to paganism, but revealed itself as belligerent to the basic conceptions of pagan teaching.

The second century was peculiarly the age of Christian apology, "the rhetorician, the philosopher, the preacher, the teacher, the declaimer, were everywhere,"<sup>2</sup> The Christian Apologists were men of liberal culture and wide learning and were therefore able to represent the new Faith as a philosophy for "to them Christianity was the one consummate philosophy sanctioned and approved by Heaven."<sup>3</sup> The Greek apologies appear highly philosophic while the Latin apologists adopt the practical and judicial literary style.

During Hadrian's reign the first apologetic literature appeared and during this time the Greek philosopher, Aristides, went over to Christianity as had Quadratus some short time before. Soon to follow was Justin, the great philosopher and martyr; Tatian, Justin's

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<sup>1</sup> James Orr, Neglected Factors in the Study of the Early Progress of Christianity, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> R. T. Kerlin, The Church of the Fathers (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1901), p. 35.

disciple; Athenagoras; Melito of Sardis; the Roman lawyer, Minucius Felix, whose dialogue Octavius is the first Latin work in the defense of Christianity. In the latter part of the second and subsequent third century such men as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian and the great writer Tertullian, took their positions in defense of the Faith.

Of major importance to us in this study is how the literary activity of these Christian writings contributed to the triumph of the movement. It appears that the first, and perhaps the superficial, task of the Apologists was to repudiate the prejudice which the Roman authorities and populace entertained toward Christianity, by refuting the charges made against the Christians. Kerlin observes in his study that such letters of defense were generally addressed to Roman emperors, although some were addressed to a populace as a whole. <sup>4</sup>

The charges brought against the Christians and which the Apologists now sought to refute were: (a) Atheism, (b) enemies of the Emperor and state, (c) cannibalism, or Thyestean banquets, and (d) incest. Tertullian ably refutes these charges and portrays the true motives of the earnest Christian, in his work apologeticus.

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4 R. T. Kerlin, Op. cit., p. 36.

Such refutation could be accomplished only through acquainting the pagan with the true nature of Christianity, and therefore in the apologetic work we find a clear explanation of the doctrines, principles and customs of Christianity. We feel that this is what prompts the historian to say,

Yet the chief service of this literature was to strengthen believers and to advance theological knowledge. It brought the Church to a deeper and clearer sense of the peculiar nature of the Christian religion, and prepared her thenceforth to vindicate it before the tribunal of reason and philosophy. 5

As we have said, the apologists did not content themselves with a mere defense of their faith but aggressively pushed the battle into the pagan camp. Fervently did they attack the irrationality and prevailing polytheism of the pagans. Their work abounds with portrayals of the absurdities and immoralities of pagan mythologies. Minucious Felix calls such religious rites "ridiculous and pitiable, an insult to God."<sup>6</sup>

Though the Apologists branded all abominable vices and immoral practices and sought to expose such elements of pagan religion, the apologists' theology was not primarily

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5 Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church

6 Minucious Felix, Octavius, xxii, 8, 9.



that of morality. The Apologists made much of Christ and the Divine revelation. They taught and wrote of His virgin birth, his crucifixion, his resurrection and his ascension. Indeed their literary work was not negative but positive, for they guaranteed an enduring truth, confirming to pagan hearts a belief in God, of immortality, and of a life of abundant joy and peace.

At the same time the Apologists sought to point out affinities between Christianity and paganism, seeking to address cultured men and make this great appeal.

They recognized not only that side of Heathenism which is opposed to Christianity, but also that which is favorable to it. Their endeavor was not to make gulf between Christianity and Heathenism as wide and impassable as they could, but to bring Christianity as near as possible to Heathenism. Therefore they sought out foreshadowings of Christianity in Heathenism, parallels between the teachings of the philosophers and those of Christianity, types and prophecies of it in the heathen world. 7

Early apologists asked merely toleration of the Christian faith, but as Latourette observes, the later apologists' way "was not of compromise but of revolution."<sup>8</sup> The apologists of our period demanded freedom of worship and it is at that this point that we see that they did

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7 Gerhard Uhlhorn, The Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), p. 267.

8 Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, Vol. I, The First Five Centuries (New York: Harper Brothers, 1937), p. 123.

not devote so much attention to the "mysteries" as to the imperial cultus. The campaign against the apotheosis of men was inaugurated with rigid vehemence. The rejection of the imperial cult marked the Christian protest to state domination of the religion of the people.

The Christian movement now adorned with a great literary work was the better equipped to face the world of intellect and challenge thinking men. They "were emboldened to present their case in the open court of public opinion and to challenge a verdict in their favour on the ground of its inherent reasonableness." <sup>9</sup> The Apologists' work provided a literary approach to doctrinal teaching, refuted false charges, depicted the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the pagan religions and through an attractive terminology charged men's hearts with a new dynamic. The literary activity of these men furnished a foundational work for the primitive Church, as it defeated the foe in the field of literary conquest and provided the Church with moral and spiritual stamina.

#### B. The triumph in the Political Realm.

Our movement here will be purely historical but a salient study for our purpose. We have witnessed the

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<sup>9</sup> James Orr, Op. cit., p. 188.

rapid growth of Christianity and can term it nothing short of miraculous. It has also been manifest that this growth was not gained through popularity on the part of Christianity, but to the contrary, through three centuries of bitter struggle.

The sequence of events relative to our present study extend from the edict issued by Galerius while on his death-bed, to the supremacy of Constantine as emperor of a reunited Empire. Lecky, in quick and bold strokes, pictures the course of events:

In his (Galerius) extreme anguish he appealed in turn to physician after physician, and to temple after temple. At last he relented towards the Christians. He issued a proclamation restoring them to liberty, permitting them to rebuild their churches, and asking their prayers for his recovery. The era of persecution now closed. One brief spasm, indeed, due to Caesar Maximian, shot through the long afflicted Church of Asia Minor; but it was rapidly allayed. The accession of Constantine, the proclamation of Milan, A. D. 313, the defeat of Licinius, and the conversion of the conqueror, speedily followed, and Christianity became the religion of the Empire. <sup>10</sup>

During the reign of Diocletian and his co-emperor Maximian, persecution of Christendom reached its height. The one province where Christians found a great degree. <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> W. E. H. Lecky, History of European Morals (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1879), I, 462.

<sup>11</sup> Constantius was compelled in fidelity to the emperor to destroy Christian Churches, but he protected them from personal molestation.

of peace was Gaul, governed by Constantius Chlorus who relished no persecution. Upon the abdiction of Diocletian and Maximian, Constantius was raised to the rank of Augustus, though Galerius retained supreme power. In the appointment of the Caesars, Galerius passed Constantine, son of Constantius Chlorus, and chose two men known for their hostility to Christianity, namely, Maximinus Daza and Severus. Upon the death of Constantius Chlorus, Severus was nominated Augustus, Maximinus Daza to the rank of first Caesar, and reluctantly Galerius recognized Constantine as second Caesar, primarily because a faithful army had acclaimed him as successor to his father. In turn Maxentius, son of Maximian, now made himself a Caesar, and was so recognized in Italy.

Under fanatical heathen rulers, such a persecution of Christians broke out as had not as yet been rivaled.<sup>12</sup> The real conflict came to an end in A. D. 311 when an edict, issued by Galerius, was posted at the capitol city of Nicomedia. The decree contained little but official recognition of the failure of persecution as a method of securing universal reverence of State deities.

The edict contains a plain confession of the impotence of heathenism. It does not speak of recognizing or

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<sup>12</sup> Vivid expression is given of this persecution by Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., pp. 415-16.

or favoring Christianity. The emperor still regards it only as a defection from the ancestral religion; he does not conceal his desire that the Christians should return to it. But he renounces the attempt to accomplish this desire by force, because he has come to see that it is impracticable, and that which he can no longer refuse to Christianity, he allows to appear as a gift of his favor, in order to cover up his impotence to some extent. 13

Thus at the death of Galerius the world balanced in a moment of great uncertainty and utter suspense. Christianity had won an unwilling toleration while paganism still had visible signs of power though rapidly decaying internally. The Empire, once so unified, now was ruled by four men: in the East, Maximinus Daza and Licinius; in the West, Constantine and Maxentius. The spirit of distrust and general dissension made war inevitable. We are to be reminded however that the deep cause for the spirit of unrest was not created by the desire for supremacy on the part of any one of these four rulers, but the basic principle was still the undecided question of the State's attitude toward Christianity. It is true that the State's position toward Christianity had been defined in the edict of A. D. 311, but Maximinus Daza and Maxentius, rulers of the East and West respectively, did their utmost to make the edict of as little benefit to the Christians as was possible.

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13 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 418.

The first act of hostility was decisive for it not only opened the seething caldron but facilitated alliances. As Licinius became the ally of Constantine, so Maxentius and Maximinus Daza consolidated forces. The attack of Constantine upon Maxentius was indeed rash and venturesome for he was not only outnumbered some three to one in men but must meet a strongly fortified line of defense. Presumably aware of his inferiority in troops and of armament, he sought higher help and turned to the supreme God whom his father had worshiped. The result is historical, for in the brilliance of the declining sun Constantine perceived a cross and the inscription, Conquer by This. In the sequence Christ appeared to him in his sleep and commanded him to make a standard in the likeness of the sign and it would be as a safeguard in his engagements. Lactantius, tutor of Constantine's son Crispus, says:

Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of Christ, ~~X~~. Having this sign,<sup>14</sup> his troops stood to arms.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted from Lactantius' work, De Mortibus Persecutorum, as reproduced by C. B. Coleman, Constantine the Great and Christianity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914), pp. 77-78.

Thus on October 27, 312 A. D., Constantine met Maxentius at Milvian Bridge and at that historic place on the Tiber, completely vanquished his foe. The conqueror was now able to march unopposed into Rome and Italy, Africa and the Islands of the sea fell to his control.

In early 313 Constantine and his present ally, Licinius, met in Milan and from this meeting issued the edict of toleration. At this point Christianity won political recognition but no specific benefits for it was put on the level with other legalized religions. The populace of the Empire were now free to embrace whatever religion they preferred as individuals.

The impending war between Licinius and Maximinus now broke out and the victory of Licinius was hailed as beneficial to Christendom. In June, A. D. 313, Licinius posted a letter in Nicomedia, which in essence, granted complete freedom of belief.

Though the edict of Milan was now enforced throughout the Empire, the Roman world was still divided between two men. While Constantine publicly announced himself as a Christian and supported the rights and encouraged the liberties of the Christians, Licinius became the firm ally of paganism and endeavored to suppress Christianity at every

point and promote paganism.

Constantine's measures during this era, A. D. 315 to 323, were very beneficial to the Christian group, yet as great as such decrees were, in no case was pagan worship explicitly forbidden. As early as A. D. 313 the Emperor made a substantial concession to the clergy who were now to be exempt from military and municipal duties. Eusebius describes the immunities of the clergy:

Wherefore it is my (the Emperor) will that these men, within the province, entrusted to thee in the Catholic Church, over which Caecilianus presides, who give their services to this holy religion, and whom they commonly call clergy, shall be held totally free, and exempt from all public offices, to the end that they may not by any error or sacrilegious deviation, be drawn away from the service due to the Divinity, but rather may devote themselves to their proper law, without any molestation. 15

Coleman tells us that the reaction to this general decree was so great that by A. D. 320, another edict was issued limiting the entrance to the Christian clergy to those classes whose exemption would make little difference to the welfare of the state. 16

Other laws followed in succession. In 315 the Church was freed from the "tributum". In 320 the Church and the clergy received the right to inherit and have wills drawn

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15 Eusebius, Ecc. Hist., X, 7.

16 C. B. Coleman, Constantine the Great and Christianity, p. 31.



in their favor. <sup>17</sup> The legalizing of the decisions of the Church in civil disputes where the parties took their case to the bishops, was also a right conferred upon the Church. In 321 the emperor Constantine recognized the observance of Sunday by suspending the work of the courts and of the city population. In June of the same year the observance was extended to include the manumission of slaves on Sunday. <sup>18</sup> Public acts of the state were purified from pagan associations and made to conform to Christian principles. <sup>19</sup> Yet heathenism still existed in the imperial quarters and frequently Constantine had intercourse with the pagan. Coleman observes that there was no effort to suppress paganism, "or even to make Christianity the one legal religion of the empire." <sup>20</sup>

Licinius now brought open accusations against Constantine for deserting the ancestral worship. We are told that Licinius saw in every Christian a secret agent of his rival Constantine. <sup>21</sup> Licinius attempted to inhibit the growth of Christianity by every means short

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17 C. B. Coleman, Op. cit., p. 32.

18 Ibid., p. 33.

19 James Orr, History and Literature of the Early Church (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933), p. 150.

20 C. B. Coleman, Op. cit., p. 37.

21 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 438.

of bloodshed.<sup>22</sup> He arrayed himself against Constantine and in 324 the cardinal battle took place. It was a signal victory for Constantine as Licinius was completely defeated. The result was now a unified Empire with the first Christian Emperor as sole head. Scholars do not minimize the extent of the victory:

Heathenism seemed to be annihilated at one blow, and now the heathen crowded in multitudes into the Church. Everywhere in the towns and villages the white robes of the baptized were to be seen; the temples of the ancient gods were deserted; the churches of the victorious God of the Christians could not contain the multitude of His worshippers.<sup>23</sup>

With the final victory Constantine's legislation became more specifically Christian in character. There now were issued a succession of laws allowing not only for the promotion of Christianity but also for the gradual extinction of paganism. The express law of the Emperor was that no Christian would be forced to take part in pagan celebrations. Old and ruined pagan temples were not only left obsolete but Constantine's direct approval of their destruction, especially during the last ten years of his life, is affirmed.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, state officials

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<sup>22</sup> We do have the noted example coming from this era of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, exposed to the fierce cold of a winter night for their fidelity to the Faith.

<sup>23</sup> Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., pp. 440-41.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. B. Coleman, Op. cit., p. 63.

were explicitly forbidden to participate in sacrifice. Even in view of all this we may say that though Constantine's policy manifested a sharp pro-Christian and anti-pagan tendency, there was no well-defined break. In fact this was so much so, and the elimination of pagan practices and influence so carefully executed, that it is said: "The triumph of Christianity was comparatively peaceful and left paganism in many instances unembittered." <sup>25</sup> Indeed, paganism itself was appropriating many of the ideals and standards which were leading in the direction of Christianity.

Regardless of such attempts of approximation on the part of paganism, after A. D. 323, Constantine used his imperial influence to suppress every form of paganism. Though not joining the Church until the hour of his death, he allied himself with the Church and exercised all the authority which the Church conceded to him in the summoning of councils and the promotion of Christianity in general. Uhlhorn portrays Constantine in this pictorial statement:

At the entrance of the imperial palace there attracted the gaze of all who went in and out, an immense picture representing Constantine himself with the labarum, the banner of the cross, in his hand, and under his feet, pierced with arrows, a dragon, the dragon of Heathenism. 26

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25 C. B. Coleman, Op. cit., p. 84.

26 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 442.

C. The triumph in the realm of Religion.

The magnitudes of the Christian faith assured its success and sealed its triumph. No religion of antiquity, and surely no current corrupt cult, could rival the great principles enunciated by Christianity. There was at this time a universal thirsting for belief, a deep dissatisfaction with the local religions and a passionate desire for a new faith.<sup>27</sup> Indeed it was in the fulfillment of man's redemptive needs in which Christianity excelled and won a place in the Roman and Greek intelligence. All men were now called to a consciousness of sin and invited to the fountain of cleansing and life: "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."<sup>28</sup>

Those features of Christianity which caused it to triumph in the sphere of religious values are many. (1) The very uniqueness of the Person and task of Christ are intrinsic and foundational. (2) Christianity as a religion of redemption. (3) Christianity's teachings consonant with the spiritual needs of man. (4) Christianity taught the doctrine of the future life. (5) Canonical books in the Old Testament were used in the preaching of the

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27 W. E. H. Lecky, History of European Morals, 1, 387.

28 Matthew 11:28.

Gospel. (6) Christianity proclaimed a universal message.  
 (7) The transmutation from the life of degeneracy to the life of love and faith was made available through the Christian faith.

Christianity opposed the might of established paganism with the testimony, life and death of Christ.<sup>29</sup> The truth had come to men, so the Christians said, for "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself."<sup>30</sup> No longer could rational and thinking men trifle with religion, no longer could ideas of God be projected for the supreme revelation had now been given. In the range of religious experiences, it has taken the power of Christ to transform the lives of men.

(1) Jesus Christ is the revelation of God; He appears not only as a supernatural, but in all sources alike, as a specifically Divine Person. He made an absolute claim to Deity, a claim which gave Him unity and identity of nature with God. He asserts a relationship of mutual knowledge, "No man knoweth the Son save the Father; neither doth any know the Father save the Son."<sup>31</sup> His entire claim differ-

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<sup>29</sup> Gerhard Uhlhorn, The Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism, p. 152.

<sup>30</sup> II Corinthians 5:19.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 11:27.

entiated Him from the men who surrounded Him. His way was perfect and His salvation complete:

Christ effectively wrought out that work of reconciliation which was the felt need of man. He set before the conscience an ideal so sublime, and yet so truly human, that it satisfied and even surpassed man's highest aspirations. His soul, like a pure mirror, reflected the image of God, as at once the High and Holy One, and our Heavenly Father. Nor did He only bring God near to man in this new and tender relation; He also reconciled man to God, making peace by the blood of His cross. He died for man and saved him by His dying, offering to God as man's representative, the true atoning sacrifice, of love—the full, living surrender of heart and life and will, sealed by His blood. 32

The uniqueness of our Lord, in contrast with the conceptions of saviours men have entertained, is in his moral perfection, or, His utter sinlessness. This we have from the testimony of Jesus Himself as recorded in the Gospel of John: "Which of you convinceeth me of sin?"<sup>33</sup> Other evidence from Scripture is abundant. Paul says in his Corinthian letter, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."<sup>34</sup> John says in his epistle, "And we know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin."<sup>35</sup> Peter admonishes, "Who did no sin, neither

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32 E. De Pressence, The Ancient World and Christianity (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, n.d.), p. 468.

33 John 8:46.

34 II Corinthians 5:21.

35 I John 3:5.

was guile found in his mouth." 36 The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin." 37

The statements of Pontius Pilate confirm these assertions. "Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, I find no fault in this man." 38 And in Matthew, Pilate is recorded as saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person; see ye to it." 39 And in Mark we read, "Why, what evil hath he done?" 40

Not only his sinlessness, but His prerogative to forgive sin was unique among men. Jesus said, "But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins." 41 The numerous instances of Christ granting forgiveness proves sufficient for our assertion. Our Lord did not assume that all men were His disciples, rather that such a relationship is a potentiality for all men, on the ground of forgiveness and regeneration.

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36 I Peter 2:32.

40 Mark 15:14.

37 Hebrews 4:15.

41 Mark 2:10.

38 Luke 23:4.

39 Matthew 27:24.

Christ taught with authority, such as no man had possessed. His authority came not alone with the words spoken, but in the power of the personality that introduces them. Indeed the Saviour says, "I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me." <sup>42</sup> His simple pronouncement of the all-important spiritual truths as though they could be grasped by the child, made them the words of life.

But surely He was not alone unique in His birth, life and teaching, but also in His death and resurrection. Certainly these separate Him from the race of men and yet bequeath to that race a lofty destiny. One scholar notes:

The resurrection of Christ was the fact that gave the disciples the convincing proof which they needed that He was the Son of God, and that all His other claims were true. It constituted the Imperial Seal of the Lord God Almighty on the life, work and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Most of all, the resurrection proved that His redemption purchased on Calvary was of actual value and efficacy to all who trusted in the name of the Saviour, or in other words, that salvation through faith in Jesus Christ actually saved! <sup>43</sup>

The world's long awaited Deliverer had surely come. The One for whom the world had pleaded, who was far greater than any local religion and who surpassed the wondering

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42 John 14:6.

43 F. E. Hamilton, The Basis of the Christian Faith (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1933), p. 285.



and aspirations of the philosophic mind, had come to place His redemptive seal upon the hearts' of wayward men.

(2) Christianity filled man's conscious need of a Redeemer and redemption. With the moral development there accompanied an awareness of sin and the need of delivery from it. As we have witnessed in our resume of the contributions of the mystery religions, men in past ages sought a release from the moral blight through orgies and initiating ceremonies. No religion was able to satisfy man as it had as yet offered no complete redemption. The Christian movement on the other had as its theme the idea of redemption.

(3) Christianity's teachings were consonant with the spiritual needs of men. The intellect of the Greek mind had caused them to erect a statue to the Unknown God. The Roman's consulted the Sybilline Books for spiritual guidance and consolation. Christianity taught a doctrine of Divine revelation and not of human speculation. Lecky portrays the great contribution of Christianity when he epitomizes:

The chief cause of its success was the congruity of its teaching with the spiritual nature of mankind. It was because it was true to the moral sentiments of the age, because it represented faithfully the supreme type of excellence to which men were tending, because it corresponded with their religious wants, aims, and emotions, because the whole spiritual being

could then expand and expatiate under its influence, that it planted its roots so deeply in the hearts of men. 44

(4) Christianity taught the doctrine of immortality. The proclamation of the Resurrection of Christ gave a new hope to men of life beyond the grave. This hope was attested by the Christians as they gathered about the graves of loved ones, singing psalms: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me." And the inscriptions on the walls of the catacombs stood as a perpetual reminder of the enduring hope: "He lives!" "Asleep with Jesus", and many other triumphant epitaphs.<sup>45</sup>

This was often manifest in the Christians' enthusiasm to be pressed forward to martyrdom. Christians were known to have lamented that they should die on the sick bed instead of the death of a martyr. Martyrdom became a passion to the early Christian who saw beyond the grave a blissful eternity with Christ. Cyprian once reminded the Christian community at Carthage:

In the first place martyrdom is not in your power, but depends upon the grace of God. Then, besides, God, the searcher of the reins and heart, sees you,

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44 W. E. H. Lecky, History of European Morals, 1, 366.

45 Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 160.

and praises and approves you. It is one thing for the spirit to be wanting for martyrdom, and another for martyrdom to have been wanting for the spirit. For God does not ask for our blood, but for our faith. This sickness is sent to prove it. 46

(5) Christianity had the Canonical Old Testament Scriptures, serving as the source book for early Christian preaching and vital living. Soon the early Gospels were to provide the doctrinal and practical basis for Christian living. Our knowledge of our Lord is virtually confined to the Gospels and this portrait is so dynamic and so self-evident that we are assured that it is incapable of invention of man.

(6) Christianity was a universal movement. Christianity was not bound with any racial characteristics nor national peculiarities, it was adaptable by any people in any age. "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." 47 Christianity met the need of the soul of man as no other religion had been able to do and was itself able to adapt its teachings and motives to adverse and varying conditions.

(7) A new faith and a higher life instituted by

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46 Quoted from Gerhard Uhlhorn, Op. cit., p. 211.

47 I Corinthians 12:13.

the Christian faith contributed to its triumph. Humanity, groping for light, found in Christ the light and life of God. Through this new faith in One whom people's attention had been absorbed, and through common devotion to Him, man transcended the limits of his finite being and could come to the full realization of the meaning of surrender to the Master of life. Life took on a new perspective for the Christian, he now walked in the light of Divine revelation. Christ had placed incommensurable value on the soul of man. Men were given the knowledge of a higher destiny, of loftier living, that they might live abundant lives.

We cannot pass this study without mention of the enduring quality of Christianity as found in the miracle of Pentecost. No other religion has ever had such a dynamic force and event to perpetuate its existence and significance. Qualben has boldly stated, "The disciples would be powerless and helpless until they had received the Holy Spirit."<sup>48</sup> The Apostles were taught by the Spirit and given the divine gift of inspiration. It was upon the day of Pentecost that the Apostles were baptized and confirmed; the guidance of the Church was now in their

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<sup>48</sup> Lars P. Qualben, A History of the Christian Church, [New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1936], p. 38.

authority. Certainly the effusion of the Spirit of the exalted Redeemer produced rich and profound results in the realm of evangelism and missions.

The blessing of Pentecost proved to be the touchstone of the entire Christian movement. A seemingly defeated Christian movement now moved out into the world with a fervor and passion it had never before possessed. Disciples of the new movement now spent great energy in propagating the truths and reality of the great Christian Gospel.

#### D. The triumph in the Ethical Realm.

In speaking of the contributing causes to the success of Christianity, no small mention is made of the moral factor. Gibbon's classical work lists this in a paramount position in relating the causes for the rapid progress of the Christian religion.<sup>49</sup> Lecky gives prominence to the ethical aspects of the Christian faith, observing that "the Christian community exhibited a moral purity which, if it has been equalled, has never for any long period been surpassed."<sup>50</sup> The scholar, James Orr

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<sup>49</sup> Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., n.d.), p. 462.

<sup>50</sup> W. E. H. Lecky, History of European Morals, ii, 11.

gives the ethical aspect prime consideration when he says in part, "The pure morals and blameless, self-denying lives of the Christians, were the strongest points the Apologists for the new religion could urge in its favor."<sup>51</sup>

Certainly the moral factor of Christianity must be dealt with in considering the causes of the triumph of the Christian movement. We are aware at this point of our study that polytheism had offered but little in ethical standards and ideals. Lecky substantiates this as he remarks:

The moral ideals had at no time been sought in the actions of the gods, and long before the triumph of Christianity, polytheism had ceased to have any great influence upon the more cultivated intellects of mankind. <sup>52</sup>

An age seeking moral improvement saw not only in the purity of living, but also in the care for the unfortunate, the poor, the widow and the orphan, the great philanthropic character of Christianity. The purity and chastity of Christian character distinguished the Christian group from the pagan environment.

The elevation of women was one of the great benefits rendered by Christianity. While Mithraism had excluded all

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<sup>51</sup> James Orr, Neglected Factors in the Study of the Early Progress of Christianity, p. 224.

<sup>52</sup> W.E.H. Lecky, History of European Morals, i, 161.

women from its religious services, Christianity received and graciously assisted womanhood to rise to its proper height and place of dignity. Marriage was made sacred and as Dollinger concludes,

Husbands and wives who feel themselves living members of Christ's body enjoy that almost irresistible power, which their love gives them for each other, for mutual sanctification and improvement, for they feel as halves of each other, and the faults of either are the faults of both. The man is to the woman, what Christ is to the Church; she submits to him as her head, and willingly and trustfully accepts his guidance, while they help one another and share in bearing each other's joys and sorrows. 53

Sensual pleasure was compensated by spiritual pride and the historian Gibbon confesses:

It was with the utmost difficulty that ancient Rome could support the institution of six vestals; but the primitive Church was filled with a great number of persons of either sex who had devoted themselves to the profession of perpetual chastity. 54

The emancipation of the slave was also attended by the triumph of Christendom. It was not so much in an immediate emancipation of slaves in which Christianity manifested its concern for this problem, but in creating a new relation between the master and the slave. This is portrayed in the beautiful Epistle to Philemon in which

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53 J. I. Dollinger, The First Age of the Christian Church (London: W. H. Allen, 1877), II, 255.

54 Edward Gibbon, Op. cit., I, 466-67.

Paul asks that the slave Onesimus be received as a brother in the faith.

Lecky points out that scarcely any other reform in the moral revolution of mankind was quite so important as the suppression of the gladiatorial show "and this feat was exclusively accomplished by the Christian Church." 55 In the latter part of Constantine's reign he issued decrees against gladiatorial shows.

The contrast between pagan morals and the ethical standards of Christianity is great, largely because the Christian Church represented all brutality as sin and accountable before God. The higher intellects of the pagan world saw such barbarious actions merely as inhuman and demoralizing. To be sure Christianity was not a mere ethical code, but this element was closely related to the great plan of salvation as it was imparted to the heart of man. The moral life was the product of a vital spiritual experience on the part of Christian followers.

The combination of both elements in one religion and especially the very nature of both elements combined, made the religion of the Cross a stumbling block, and an offense. The point to which we call attention is the fact that these elements were combined in one religion and that the combination made them even more distasteful to the natural instincts of man than the

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55 W. E. H. Lecky, Op. cit., ii, 34.



separate elements themselves were; and the fact that Christianity spread in spite of this, is additional evidence that there was a divine power working in and through the gospel and likewise in the hearts of men, changing their hearts and making them ready to welcome a message which was repellent to the natural man. <sup>56</sup>

#### E. Summary.

In any investigation of the cause of the early growth of Christianity, one finds various historic interpretations. Perhaps chief among these, and certainly the most classic, is Gibbon's five reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity. They are: (a) the inflexible and intolerant zeal of the early Christians, (b) the belief in the future life, (c) the power of miracles, (d) the austere morals of the Christians, and (e) the compact Church organization. <sup>57</sup> With but a conservative degree of criticism we may note that this historian has failed to deal with three primary truths, namely, the supernatural endowment of the Christian faith, the Divine revelation and the very source of the zeal and moral perfection of which he speaks, namely, Christ. It would seem that the omission of such fundamental concepts disrobes Christianity of the very features which attracted men.

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<sup>56</sup> F. E. Hamilton, The Basis of the Christian Faith, p. 122.

<sup>57</sup> Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 1, Ch. xv.

Latourette, on the other hand, portrays a deep social cause for the success of the early Christian movement. (a) The endorsement of Constantine, (b) the disintegration of pagan society, (c) the organization of Christianity, (d) the inclusiveness of Christianity, (e) Christianity as intransigent and flexible, (f) Christianity supplied the Graeco-Roman world what it was seeking for in the realm of religion better than any of its competitors, (g) the Jewish origin assisted the growth of Christianity, (h) miracles attributed to Christianity accelerated the growth, (i) the moral quality of the Christians and (j) the deep underlying cause, the original impulse coming from Jesus.<sup>58</sup> Here there is the final consent to the life of Christ, but the entire setting is social centered. It would appear that the spread of the Christian faith was accelerated almost purely on the ground of natural phenomenon with little account of the supernatural or intrinsic worth of Christianity itself.

Renan,<sup>59</sup> in his work, Marc Aurele, attributes the spread to the Christian doctrine of immortality and the

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58 Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, i, The First Five Centuries, 170-72.

59 F. E. Hamilton, Basis of Christian Faith, p. 130, citing Renan's work, Marc Aurele.

offer of complete pardon to the sinner, accompanied by a strong moral reform. Here too we may ask, who sponsored such a hope for the future life and initiated the original concept of sin as well as offered the pardon for such sin? Without an intervention of the Divine in the providence of mankind, man would still be hopelessly lost.

The historian Lecky portrays a number of reasons for Christianity's triumph: (a) Christianity was not bound by local ties, (b) it appealed to the affections, (c) it was a pure and noble system of ethics, (d) it taught love, (e) it was the religion of the oppressed, and (f) to a world in political dissolution, Christianity offered the hope of the millennium.<sup>60</sup> But to this the scholar adds a profound statement which strikes at the root of the true cause for Christianity's victory:

To those weary of the cold grandeur of Cato, it presented a Teacher who could weep at the sepulchre of His friend, who was touched with the feeling of our infirmities. To a world, in fine, distracted by hostile creeds and colliding philosophies, it taught its doctrines, not as human speculation, but as a Divine revelation, authenticated much less by reason than by faith. 61

It would seem evident that Lecky knows well the heart and need of man, and the love and mercy of a compassionate God

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<sup>60</sup> W. E. H. Lecky, History of European Morals, 1, 387-88.

<sup>61</sup> Loc. Cit.

when he provides for the basis of the triumph in the fact of a supreme revelation and the response of men in the appropriation of faith.

Marshall gives a considerable list of the causes for the rapid growth of Christianity: (a) the zeal of the Christians, (b) the doctrine of the future life, (c) salvation by faith, (d) conscious need of a Redeemer, (e) the Christian brotherhood, (f) the hopeless condition of the pagan world, (g) the superior morals of the Christians, (h) the canonical books of the Old Testament, (i) Christianity rose above the confines of nationalism, and concludes by saying:

It is easy, then, to explain the conquest of Christianity in the Roman world. The new religion was based, not upon ritual or mysteries, although the few it had were very potent and significant, but it was a spiritual religion, based on faith, and culminating in love, the expression of which was made in words of comfort and deeds of benevolence. The mystery religions were out-stripped in the race. Cults centuries old were scattered. Their temples crumbled. Their devotees abandoned the old faiths that brought them little comfort and hope, for the new religion, with its evangel of purity, peace and good will. <sup>62</sup>

The author recognizes the aspirations of the heart of man, the essential truth of the benevolence of the Christians and the disintegration of pagan religions. He fails to

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<sup>62</sup> F. H. Marshall, The Religious Background of Early Christianity (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1931), p. 296.

deal with the Divine Saviour and reiterates much of the social interpretation.

Such interpretations, apart from Lecky's conclusive analysis, center respective deductions as to the cause of the rapid spread of early Christianity about natural grounds or psychological bases. It is manifest that all these elements played their role in the victory as viewed from a comprehensive vantage point, but in themselves appear only as symbols. When, on the other hand, Christianity's origin is viewed as supernatural, its revelation Divine, its Founder Supreme, and its ethics the resultant factor of a transformed life, we have the true and providential cause for the triumph of the Christian faith.

What we have interpreted to be the cause for the rapid spread and ultimate triumph of Christianity is accounted for in the supernatural. Had Christianity not been a prophetic and divine movement, inaugurated for the redemption and restoration of man, it could not have achieved its end results. Until the time of Constantine, Christianity was never spread by force nor was it sanctioned by political powers. It did not appeal to man's lower nature but conversely demanded a virtuous life, necessitating a moral regeneration as well as a spiritual

renovation. As we have seen, Christianity was a despised movement, persecuted and oppressed. Uniquely enough during such tribulation Christianity was not knit into a solid fabric by a compact organization but was dominated by the Holy Spirit. Certainly it appears evident that the movement did not attract its disciples on purely natural grounds but was ordained for the calling out of the multitudes who would be loyal to the risen Christ.

Nor can we fail to give mention to the intrinsic worth of Christianity. It was adequate to meet the despairing need of the human heart, it wrought salvation within the heart and a pure and lofty conscience within the mind. It met the needs of men on the level which they could interpret, it proclaimed its Gospel in simplicity and yet an eloquence never equalled.

We gain a true appreciation of our faith when we compare it with the philosophy and motives of other religious movements. Therefore we can say that Christianity triumphed because it was so destined, it was with that purpose that the Divine Son came into the world as Redeemer and Lord. Christianity triumphed in the sphere of literature because the hand of the Divine Master raised up effective apologetic works. It triumphed in the realm of political power because the Saviour touched the life of an

emperor. It conquered in the realm of religion because it was divinely instituted and inaugurated by the Christ who established a way of redemption for a lost and needy world. Nor were disciples left alone when the Master was crucified for the Holy Spirit took abode in the hearts of His own. God's Book was eventually presented and proved the text book of life for wayward men.

Christianity surpassed all other philosophies and religions in the thical sphere, not because Christianity was essentially destined for the establishment of morality, but because it was the outgrowth of the total sweep of the Spirit upon the heart of depraved man! Christianity was destined to become supreme for it alone had a Divine Saviour who came to a world of lost men with the explicit purpose of bringing them back to God; it lifted fallen men to renewed fellowship with the Creator.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARIZATION

In the early portion of our study we have evidenced the corruption and chaotic state of the political, religious and ethical life of the ancient world of the first century of the Christian era. It would seem obvious that the centuries of heathen influence in the realm of spiritual and moral living had done little for the anguish of the troubled world. Certainly it does not take an acute scholar to recognize the intrinsic value of Gospel preaching and the subsequent spiritual and moral regeneration. Indeed the sceptical historians of necessity acknowledge the supreme contribution of Christianity in a confused age.

It would be absurd to suppose that the demoralization of the first century played no part in the ultimate triumph of Christianity. The dissatisfaction of the age was the seed which was to take root when nurtured by Christian environment. The religious conditions of the century did little more than to stimulate loftier thoughts to an anticipation which was realized only in Christendom. Man's longing for deliverance, for an experience of salvation and a desire for a complete emancipation from



the wretched conditions prevailing, symbolized a growing unrest which was quelled only as faithful disciples brought the Gospel of Christ to needy men. Such depraved conditions only made the triumph of Christianity a pending reality.

But Christianity met competition as did the pagan philosophies and religions. Yet one thing is apparent, the competing religions and philosophies of the Graeco-Roman world decidedly assisted the Christian movement for they so dispersed the thought and attention of men that when one unifying, constructing and beneficial Faith presented itself the former appeared only as a means to an ultimate end.

Judaism was bound by nationalism and traditionalism, though her contribution to the ancient world can by no means be minimized. Stoicism lacked the warmth of affection and the passion for Deity. The mystery religions were barren of the noble ethics, while the imperial cult was but an attempt to pacify the religious appetite of a spiritually impoverished populace. In contrast Christianity was universal; its zeal and passion was stimulated by the Person of Christ; its disciples were pure and noble; its salvation was complete enough for all men in all conditions.

Though Christianity was ordained to meet the foe

in deadly conflict and prove her qualities through decades of persecution, she was protected during her formative years through her kinship to Judaism. This plays no small part in the ultimate victory of the Christian faith for under such guise, Christians willing or unwillingly submitting to such recognition, the New Faith took root, raised up her disciples and literary apologists and spread like leaven in the Roman world. If not before, certainly by 70 A. D. Christianity became separated from Judaism and was placed before the tribunal time and again. The remarkable endurance, the persistence and fidelity, caused her again to triumph over determined adversaries. The very charge of treason leveled against the faithful Christians by Roman magistrates only popularized the name. Men became eager to join the ranks of the martyrs, determined to stand in faithfulness to the Christ whom they could not deny.

Three movements show clearly the growing importance and increasing immensity of the Christian movement. (a) Celsus' attack upon Christianity. The very appropriation of literary channels to refute the doctrines and truth of Christianity evidences a growing fear of an ultimate triumph of the Faith. (b) Governmental intolerance. When the Christian movement attained such distinction as to command political interference, we may well know that it

was assuming too rapid an advancement for the evasive politicians to enjoy. (c) Unrest among the Roman citizenry manifests a new spirit of at least a portion of the populace. When men saw tangible evidence of higher and more sublime living, of beneficent service, of spiritually enlightened men, they could not longer content themselves with counterfeits.

Christianity did meet organized paganism. It met paganism's rebuff and persecution. It met and conquered paganism in the realm of philosophy, in the political sphere, in the religious realm and the ethical realm. Christianity so completely dominated the scene that by A. D. 388, the Roman Senate excluded all pagan practices.

Certainly one cannot be justified in suggesting purely natural causes for the triumph of Christianity in the spheres in which we have mentioned, although such victory is not without its purely intrinsic worth and manifest qualities. Nevertheless, Christianity triumphed not so much because of her natural attributes but because of her supernatural character and endowments. Christianity's superiority in the realms mentioned and accounted for, plus her survival in the midst of a pagan world which evidenced continued hostility, argues for her supernatural character.

Christianity's very chronological position in the sequence of the millenniums displays a divine movement. At no other time in the history of mankind was a world so ready for the Gospel message and in no other world empire could it so readily take root and spread as in that of the Romans'. Christianity was able, through the work of the Spirit, to raise up an apologetic work in the literary field of the age. Christianity gripped the hearts of men with the experiences of Calvary, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost. It triumphed in the realm of religion because its Founder was the Divine Son.

Christianity triumphed because she bowed to no foe and yielded no policies. It utilized no foul means for its advancement but presented itself as a Divine Revelation, inaugurated by a Saviour and preached by Saints. It offered hope to the seeker, freedom to the captive and life to the dying.

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