

# CHRISTIANITY AND PAGANISM

Primary Resource:

“Seven Revolutions - How Christianity Changed the World”

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The Christian religion originates from its founder Jesus Christ who lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century in an area we know today as Palestine. At the time of Jesus, the Roman Empire had extended its influence and reach throughout the known world. The Empire stretched from England in the north to Morocco in the south and Iraq in the east and surrounded the entire Mediterranean Sea. During the Pax Romana, (Roman peace, 27 BC to 180 AD) the Empire reached its peak in terms of land area, and its population swelled to an estimated 70 million people.

The Christian Church was born in the Roman Empire and was immediately confronted by the Greco-Roman culture and various pagan religions. The term “paganism” is commonly used to refer to polytheism or the worship of more than one god. A pagan is also considered to be one who, for the most part, has no religion and indulges in worldly delights and material possessions; someone who revels in sensual pleasures; a hedonistic or self-indulgent individual.

Traditional Roman religion centered on civic duty – those who participated were not held to a code of morality or required to hold certain beliefs. The practical exercise of patriotism in the Roman Empire was the imperial cult (worship of the God-Emperor), in which citizens were expected to make sacrifices to the gods in honor of, or in the name of, the emperor.

At the same time the emperors were following Egyptian precedent and increasingly claiming divine titles for themselves. Julius Caesar claimed to be descended from the gods, and when he died, the Roman Senate proclaimed him divine. Once he was declared to be a god, his nephew and heir, Augustus claimed to be the son of god (Interesting that Jesus, the son of God was born during the reign of Augustus). This trend continued until it came to a highpoint at the end of the first century with the emperor Domitian, who demanded to be called, “lord and god.”

Christians naturally believed that participating in any pagan worship was idolatry. But the Roman government saw their refusal to be part of the imperial cult as an act of treason, and treason was punishable by death. So the friction between the Christian Church and the Roman Government centered on a conflict of loyalties – Christ or Caesar.

Christianity was different from all other religions in that it offered an open membership to join not based on race or ethnicity and with a strict moral expectation. It was a universal religion, anyone was invited to join the Church, but once a person joined, they were expected to make a serious commitment to changing their lifestyle.

The Christians came to be hated for what the Romans saw as “rigidity,” or an inflexibility with regard to the worship of many gods, Christians were called “atheists” because they acknowledged only one God, and ironically the Roman establishment justified its intolerance for the Christian religion by calling the Christians intolerant.

Christianity overcame paganism by instituting a radical change in the way human society thought of the individual, the family, work, religion, community, attitudes toward life and death, and even government.

## **The Person**

In the worldview of ancient cultures, some people were expendable, and some people were property. Furthermore, in the Roman Empire the enjoyment of quality of life was a luxury afforded to the rich. Both religion and government existed to serve the ruling classes, which created hopelessness in the lower classes and a tendency toward selfish hedonism in the upper classes.

From a Christian perspective, all people are created equal, in the image of God, and no one is expendable. Christianity affirmed the universal dignity of human life. Those who could not speak (babies) or those who could not speak the languages of civilization (the barbarians who did not speak Greek or Latin) were considered less than fully human and were denied the benefits of society. There was no idea of equality in the Roman world. The pagan world had no notion of “human rights” – no idea that a human being was a person who was somehow sacred just because they were human.

In the Roman Empire divorce was easy, prostitution flourished without controls, homosexuality was commonplace. Even bestiality was practiced and received little censure, the Roman empire was a sexual paradise.

It was paradise for the rich and privileged classes who, when they weren't murdering one another, could afford to indulge every whim. They had slaves to rape whenever they like, and since a slave was property, he or she just had to take it. Slaves made up at least a third of the population of ancient Italy – and about half of them were owned by the 1 percent, the richest of the rich.

What was interesting about the upper classes is that they stopped procreating (having children). Pagan philosophers were big on eugenics (Hitler and Planned Parenthood), they thought humans should be bred as carefully as we breed cattle. And they thought the children born of those carefully planned unions should be brought up primarily to be useful.

Utility was a key factor in deciding whether a human being was worth living. The useful should be rewarded and the useless should be thrown away. Abortion and infanticide were commonplace in the culture, requiring little deliberation.

In all of history, only one culture had forbidden these practices – that of the Jews. They were an insignificant minority in the first century. Every other nation, every other empire, every other kingdom, every other people – the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Hittites, the Greeks, the Romans – routinely killed their young.

In Rome, a child did not achieve personhood until they were recognized by the head of the family, the father. When the mother had given birth, a midwife placed the child on the floor and summoned the father into the room. He examined the child with his criteria of selection in mind and if the child was picked up by the father it was accepted, if it was left on the floor, it would be drowned immediately in a bucket of water, or brought to the town dump to be exposed to the

wild dogs and vultures. If they survived for any considerable time there, they might be rescued by pimps and raised up as child prostitutes.

## **The Family**

The home is a place of safety and love, where women and children are not to be exploited. In pagan times, a family was a man – the paterfamilias, or the father of the family – and his property (his wife and children).

Love is seldom part of the vocabulary when pagans talk about the family. They speak of duty but not love. Pagans and Christians disagreed quite starkly on what a family should be. For Christians, God himself is a loving family. The Father loves the Son; the Son is obedient to the Father out of love. The love shared by the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit.

The pagan gods had families, too. But we certainly don't look for love in their relationships. The pagan gods have dysfunctional families that look to destroy relationships between father, mother and children. The ruling gods are those who succeeded in a war against their own father.

In the Christian worldview, it is human beings that bring sin into the world, in the pagan worldview the gods themselves set the example of violence, murder, parricide (the killing of parents) and betrayal.

In the Trinity, Christians have a model of perfect love. There is no betrayal, no conflict, but only unity. The God the Christians worshipped was a model of perfect love, an example to live up to. The stories of the pagan gods gave pagan believers a model to live down to.

## **The Workplace**

The workplace affirmed that people are not property, that they must be free to choose their work, and they must be given the free time for worship, for artistic expression, and to enjoy their loved ones. The Church emphasized the dignity of human labor and affirmed the honor in manual labor.

Pagan intellectuals were very much bothered by the fact that Christians were so *lower-class*. A bunch of weavers and tent-makers and shoemakers setting themselves up as thinkers and teachers.

How could God through the incarnation choose to grow up in poverty and have a mother who was a peasant girl? If hypothetically, God had wanted to produce a human son, he would have chosen a princess to be the mother. And what about a bunch of fishermen as the leadership group of this new movement?

In the ancient world, the taking of slaves was normally the result of conquest. When Rome conquered the Mediterranean world, huge numbers of enemy soldiers and often ordinary citizens on the losing side became slaves. The children of slaves were also slaves by birth, so in time, the slave population grew to be enormous. No one knows how many people in the empire

were slaves, but in Italy, where many of the slaves were sent after Rome's numerous victories, slaves probably composed at least a third of the population.

Slaves were the ones that did all the menial work necessary for society to function efficiently. The ruling elite believed that it was base and ignoble to do useful work with your hands. The superior men of society rule the inferior classes. The rulers should be men who were suited for ruling: intelligent, educated, and not sullied by mere physical service.

Christians have a radically different view of work than that of the pagans. In the Old Testament, work is depicted as a necessity of the human condition, and as honorable. Even in a paradise, there was work: Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden "to till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15) – and that was before the Fall. To the Israelites, there was nothing undignified in the ancestor of humanity having been a gardener – or their greatest king, David, having been a shepherd. God himself labored to create the world, and then he rested. The Israelites followed the same pattern in observing a Sabbath day of rest each week.

The idea of working for six days and taking the seventh day off was very strange to Romans, who thought the Jews must be a lazy nation. But in fact the Sabbath exists because your work and God's work are related. God creates out of nothing and we humans participate in the creation by our work. We are partners with God in creation.

Pagan values accorded work as a badge of shame and idleness as a virtue. Christians held the exact opposite world view as expressed by St. Paul "For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living." (Second Thessalonians 3:11-12)

Pagans thought work was for the servile classes and leisure was for the upper crust. The Christians thought that both work and leisure were necessary for everyone.

## **Religion**

Greco-Roman religion was primarily an attempt to explain the universe by projecting human qualities (including the worst human characteristics) on a cast of cosmic characters who could be credited with (or blamed for) the existence of whatever seemed hard to explain. For pagan worshipers, the needs and desires of multiple gods (who often had conflicts with one another, betrayed one another, and acted out of lust, pride and anger) explained why things were the way they were in the world. Creation was often explained as the result of cosmic procreation, in which a male deity impregnated a female deity and thereby created life.

Polytheism, the belief in multiple gods, was based on the assumption that different gods must be responsible for different spheres of life. There was a god of love and a god of war, a god of agricultural production (fertility, harvest) and a god of agricultural barrenness (winter).

The Church that Jesus founded with his apostles was a revolution of religion in three important ways:

First, Christianity redefined the way that humans relate to the Divine. The relationship between Greeks and Romans and their gods was a relationship of patronage, in which the people hoped to please their gods enough to receive protection and blessings. The Hebrew people, the nation

of Israel, were in a covenant relationship with their God, and they were expected to remain faithful to God in order to avoid the consequences of infidelity and to live a life of blessing. But Christians enter into a relationship with God as individuals responding to an offer of forgiveness, which is, at its heart, God taking the initiative to reach out to people in mercy and compassion. Those individuals who respond to God's invitation are then gathered into a community of mutual care and support, and they reflect the grace they have received from God toward one another. In the Christian faith, God is not only the transcendent Creator and Judge; he is also relational – up close and personal, and intimately involved in the lives of people and their relationships.

Second, Christianity redefined the way that humans understand God. For the Greeks and Romans, there were many gods, and even demigods or other beings who were quasi-divine. For the Hebrews, there was one God, but direct contact with him was rare and reserved for a select few. For Christians, the one God can be known in Jesus Christ and is present in the Holy Spirit. With the coming of Jesus, something unprecedented had happened. He was “God with us”. The Divine had become human and dwelt among us.

Third, the understanding of God as a Trinity of three divine persons means not only that God is in relationship with humanity, but also that God is internally relational, that Divine love is constantly shared among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that this loving relationship has existed since long before humans entered the picture. The relational nature of God, along with the extension of God's love into the human realm, led the Christians to conclude that the very nature of the Church required that it must also be an extension of God's love in the world: in other words, it must be inclusive. Unlike other ancient religions that were specific to a particular ethnic or geographical group, or open to only a certain segment of society, the Church was open to all: Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

## **Community**

In contrast to the gods of the Greco-Roman religion, the God of the Hebrews required his people to care for the widow, the orphan, and even the stranger in their midst. The prophets proclaimed that it is a sin for the powerful to oppress the weak. And when Jesus came along, he pressed these expectations even further. He raised the bar on morality, expanding the precept that we care for others to include those outside our own group. The answer to the question “Who is our neighbor?” can no longer be limited to those who are like us. The Church expected its followers to share the love of God with everyone – thus redefining the concept of community as something that really has no boundaries.

A major portion of early Christian catechesis (in which new converts prepared for baptism) was education in morality. Believers had to know how to live as a Christian in the world before they could be baptized, and adapting to this radical difference in behavior formed an important part of the Christian identity. Christians distinguished themselves from their pagan neighbors by the difference in their lifestyle. Morality was one of the markers of a Christian, but the moral expectations were not limited to how Christians treated other Christians. The expectations were extended to include the ministry of Christians to all people.

The Romans had a tradition of philanthropy, but although the word philanthropy means “love for humanity,” it's not an accurate label for what was practiced in the ancient world. Like Roman religion, Roman philanthropy was self-serving. The wealthy did not give to the poor; they gave

to the city in order to increase their approval rating with the public. They paid for buildings (often pagan temples, but also court buildings and shopping malls) as well as public works. They paid for theaters and amphitheaters, as well as sponsored games and shows, and occasionally they handed out bread or coins to the people who gathered for their spectacles. But they did all these works, not out of love for the people, or compassion for the needy; they did it in order to make a spectacle of themselves, to draw attention to themselves and make the people of the city feel indebted to them.

Christian charity, on the other hand, means giving without expecting anything in return, and this idea was new in the Roman world. In fact the word charity comes from a Latin word for love, and this label fits because Christian charity is motivated by love.

Early Christian writings proposed a symbiotic relationship between the rich and the poor. God gave surplus resources to the wealthy specifically so that they would give to those who were in need. It was then the responsibility of the poor to pray for their benefactors that their wealth would not become a spiritual hindrance. From as early as we can tell in the life of the Church, almsgiving has always been considered a form of penance that is an important part of how we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12)

In community people are taught to love their neighbor. The Church cared for the poor and the sick, regardless of their religion. The concept of Christian charity was something alien to the self-centered perspective of the Roman culture, yet by the end of the fourth century Christian charity had replaced Greco-Roman virtue as the goal of human progress.

## **Death**

Death was the riddle the pagans couldn't solve. What happened when people died? There might be life after life, or there might not be. If there was, it might be something pleasant, or it might be only eternal gloom, even for the virtuous.

Naturally, one thing a Roman couldn't tolerate was a dead body. Cremation was the normal Roman funeral practice: it got rid of the body quickly, and (at least if you were lucky) it kept the spirit of the deceased from coming back to haunt you.

Perhaps the worst thing about burying the dead was that it was likely to attract spiritual infestations. Roman popular culture was grossly superstitious. Even an educated Roman gentleman was scared to death of ghosts. Since no one knew what happened after death, the superstitious imagination ran riot. Graves were places where ghosts might congregate, and who knew what a ghost might do to you if you met one on a dark and stormy night.

Christians believe in the resurrection – not just the immortality of the soul, but the resurrection of the body. This idea marked the difference between the Christians and their pagan neighbors. A dead body was something a pagan didn't want to think about. The mere sight of a corpse made a pagan ritually unclean, not to mention giving him the willies. Yet Christians treated dead bodies as though they were worth something – as though they were still somehow connected to the honored dead, not just a cast-off container for the soul.

For Christians, the body is integral to the person, and the person will have a body for eternity. That makes the body more than a sort of envelope for the soul, a container that is cast off at death. When we Christians speak of the dignity of the body, we mean that the human person is composed of body and soul. The body is holy because we were made in the image of God, because God became one of us, and because our bodies are united to the flesh and blood of God in Christ.

Wherever the Church spread, Christians took up the practice of burying their dead. The first major building projects of the new faith in Rome were not the churches – one never knew when the next persecution might break out, and the building would be knocked to the ground. The first visible Christian structures were the catacombs.

In the catacombs the Christians buried their dead and celebrated the “birthdays” of the martyrs. They surrounded their loved ones with the most elaborate and costly art they could afford – sometimes mere graffiti, but in some cases they produced some of the most striking paintings that have survived from ancient times. The more martyrs there were, the more often Christians assembled in the catacombs.

The Roman catacombs eventually extended to more than sixty miles of labyrinthine underground corridors. Estimates of the population of this “city of the dead” range into the millions. And Christians, understandably, became known as the people who handled dead bodies –who polluted themselves at graves. Christians were the people who dug graves and handled dead bodies, so they were the people who had no fear of death.

The catacombs had made the Christians odd in the Roman world – and then a century later pagans were following the Christian lead and burying their own dead. By the late 300’s, a new attitude toward the dead had spread throughout the empire. When St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, had a new basilica put up in the city, the people begged him to consecrate it with the relics of the martyrs. He obliged them by looking for some local martyrs to dig up and transfer to the new church. Christians witnessed the miracles that took place because of the power of the relics of the saints.

Human rights and the value of human life. Christianity influenced attitudes toward life and death and the belief in the afterlife thereby promoting a culture of life. This new culture of life (and eternal life) gave people the hope they desperately needed, which led to the freedom to rise above the daily grind, and even to express their God-given creativity through art.

## **Government**

Once Constantine became emperor, one of the first things he did was to legalize Christianity (Edict of Milan 313). Many people wrongly believe that Constantine made Christianity the only legal religion of the empire and forced pagans to convert to Christianity. This could not be further from the truth. Constantine did none of these things. In fact, he enacted a law that guaranteed freedom of religion for all citizens.

The Romans initially had a Republic as their form of government. They were ruled by a senate and with elected officials. By the time of the birth of Jesus, the Roman Republic had fallen apart because of the aristocracy's greed for power. Julius Caesar had attempted to turn a temporary appointment of emergency leadership into a permanent position of ultimate power – and he was assassinated in 44 BC. The result was a civil war. Soon it became clear that someone would emerge as sole ruler; it was just a matter of who it would be. After the decisive battle of Actium in 31 BC, the Republic disintegrated and Caesar's nephew and adopted heir Octavian assumed power; he became Rome's first emperor and eventually took the name Augustus. Thus, when the republic disintegrated, it became an empire, with Augustus as its first emperor, and with a mission to expand its borders and take over the world. At precisely this time in history, Jesus Christ came and offered an alternative to empire. We call it *the kingdom of God*, but that phrase in Greek could just as well be translated "empire of God." Jesus brought us God's empire and preached it as the Good News – over and against the Roman Empire (or any other empire).

The revolution of community that sprang from the Church's emphasis on love of neighbor and care for the poor led to the need for a system of collection and distribution of money and goods for the needy. The contrast with the Roman Empire could not be sharper: while the structure of pagan Roman society was designed to serve those at the top, the hierarchical leadership of the Church was meant to serve those at the bottom. Additionally, in the hierarchy of the Church, there was no caste system: anyone – regardless of social standing – could devote his or her life to the service of Christ and his Church, and even a slave could be a bishop.

By the time the Church was in position to influence government in the fourth century, a Christian idea of government had emerged – that those who governed should be the protectors of those whom they govern. Leadership was not a right; it was a responsibility – one that included serving the "least" of society. To govern was to be entrusted with something very valuable – human beings created in the image of God and the resources to sustain them. In other words, Christian leadership is a form of stewardship.

In Government, rulers should serve those whom they serve and all people should enjoy freedom of religion. Christianity affected how the rulers viewed themselves, they were not gods and were morally accountable to God for how they ruled. There was a higher power, an authority over the emperor, one who had behavioral expectations for the emperor, and one who could remove the emperor from the throne if he did not measure up.