

## **THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY**

**Christianity was the First ancient religion to become recognized as the one officially state supported religion. It became the most vital force in the barbarian West. The Historic Role of Christianity in its first seven centuries was to absorb many of the best elements of ancient civilization and to transmit them to the Middle Ages.**

**Most important Historical developments were:**

- 1.organization of the church**
- 2.the creative intellectual leadership of the church fathers**
- 3.the rise of the Papacy**
- 4.the failure of secular leadership and the rise of ecclesiastical leadership**

**Life of Christ, c. 7/4 BC – 29/33AD**

**Christianity expressed a positive social ideal to be followed in mortal life as well as a doctrine to be fulfilled in the afterlife. At first, it was looked upon as a heretical Jewish sect, and as something typical of Jewish sectarian violence. However, it soon spread among “gentiles”, thanks to the decision by Paul to open it to non-Jews. In the process it lost exclusivity.**

**It was looked on with suspicion by Roman mainstream society because of:**

- 1.its belief that the Empire (World) would end with second coming**
- 2.its Refusal to venerate Roman emperor**
- 3.Paul’s decision to make it open to non-Jews, thus, identifying the cult with other mystery cults; however, baptism implied exclusivity**
- 4.Its Rejection of pagan cults affected the economic livelihood of associated pagans**
- 5.Exclusivity: the sacraments, the last supper was associated with cannibalism by non Christians; Christians calling themselves “brother and sister” was equated with incest; “Christ is King” smacked of disloyalty; the self righteousness of Christians convinced that the second coming of heaven was at hand combined with their belief that all non believers would be punished sounded like misanthropy.**
- 6.There were numerous False deductions: Christians were antagonistic to the existing social order; Romans were alarmed by its advocacy of celibacy. Elements in the Roman government knew better, but any major calamity became blamed by public on Christians.**
- 7.Thus, Christians were guilty of forming illegal associations and their refusal to worship emperor represented treason.**

**However, eventually the Roman public became aware of the high moral qualities of the religion by watching Christians face persecution and death steadfastly. This convinced many that Christians really did possess a source of spiritual comfort and strength, inducing many others to join the cult; and not just the poor and downtrodden. Already by reign of Domitian, Christians were found at the highest**

circles of society. Nonetheless, as the appeal of the religion grew its followers encountered a challenging Era of widespread persecutions: 250-284 AD;

Church organization mirrored that of the Roman Empire: it was organized in urban communities, whose leadership and administrative positions corresponded to the administrative units of Empire.

It employed the Diocese system; *ekklesia*; bishop = *episcopus* (overseer); *presbeutes* = agent or ambassador or elder (who assisted with the spiritual authority of bishop); *diakonos* = minister or servant (who maintained church property and distributed charity).

**The IMPACT OF CONSTANTINE:** Following the Battle of Mulvian Bridge 312 AD, Constantine assumed role as sole emperor (achieved by 324AD). With 40,000 men he overcame Maxentius' forces of 180,000, and claimed his victory came "at the sign of the cross." His triumphal arch was inscribed, *Instinctu divinitatis, mentis magnitudine* ("inspired by god with greatness of mind") in recognition of his conversion. At the time of Constantine (306-332 AD) the Population of the eastern half of the empire was perhaps 10 % Christian; that of the west 5%.

Constantine's Edict of Toleration 313 AD, restored property to Roman Christians; his Edict of Milan 313 enabled universal religious toleration. Christian clergy became exempt from *munera*. Constantine was asked by church leaders to mediate ecclesiastical disputes, schisms, such as the— Donatists in Africa 313. His Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, outlawed Arianism. With these Edicts the church was officially tolerated, its property was restored; priests enjoy same privileges and exemptions as priests of other pagan cults.

Constantine stopped the persecutions, restored Christian property, financially supported African Catholics, exempted clergy from liturgies, but by doing so and in the process he bound the church with welfare of the Roman state and insisted on orthodoxy.

**II. THE EMERGENCE OF CHURCH INSTITUTIONS.** Christianity represented a positive social ideal. Christians must perform good works, show kindness and charity toward the poor, and love their enemies. They must avoid "sinful" behavior, sins of the flesh. Many Christians viewed the best policy as separatism from the physical world, fleeing temptation by living in the desert, living in austerity, and conquering human desires. This led to MONASTICISM particularly in the Egyptian desert and Palestine where traditions of religious austerity were pronounced. The problem of moral decline in spiritual behavior was never significant prior to the reign of Constantine because the cult was outlawed and threatened. The threat of persecution was sufficient to keep people spiritually inclined; being a Christian in and of itself was a sufficient test of faith. But what to do when the religion became recognized by the Roman government?

Ideological basis for church hierarchy was minimal: Jesus founded his church on

his apostles – St. Peter who died in Rome, “on this Rock I will build my church”. This gave the head of the church in Rome ideological legitimacy to claim of ascendancy over other churches. Traditionally, the Petrine Theory of Apostolic Succession recognized the authority of Pope in Rome. A few other bishoprics were founded by the apostles themselves; other lay in important cities of the empire where a wealthier, educated, and influential laity existed.

The church hierarchy used the SACRAMENTS as a source of power:

1. baptism
2. confirmation
3. eucharist
4. penance
5. anointing the sick
6. ordination into holy orders
7. marriage

III With the Support of Constantine, the question became how to proceed. Needs included:

1. the organization of the hierarchy
2. orthodoxy of Christian dogma
3. Greater control over monasteries
4. The establishment of Christian “recursive institutions” (schools, education, what to read?)

Constantine’s tendency to favor Christianity led to active intervention in the affairs of the church. At the request of arch bishops he was induced to convene Synods, councils, etc. The Emperor was not yet a member of the church, nonetheless, he exercised ecclesiastical leadership over bishops and assumed responsibility for its harmony. Later emperors would cite his role as precedent for their leadership in the church.

There were numerous Heresies to be addressed:

Donatism in Carthage (340-397) concerned the punishment of priests who deserted church during persecution; their behavior was largely whitewashed by the church hierarchy after Constantine, and drove many Christians away from the church. This resentment eventually played into the hands of the Islamic ferment of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Arianism – concerned a dispute between the Bishop of Alexandria and Arius the priest, Arius saw Christ as the word of God, incarnate in human flesh; divine but not of same sacred nature as father. He attempted to adapt Christianity to “Neo Platonic” philosophical distinctions. Arius was summoned by Constantine to the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, and after refusing to renounce his views he was declared a heretic and driven into exile. Arianism was thus denounced as heresy, and the bishops present formulated the Nicene Creed. This was the first ecumenical

**council of all bishops and its conclusions were officially recognized as the supreme authority on doctrinal and disciplinary matters. Yet the initiative and leadership of this reform was entirely in the hands of Constantine. So long as later emperors were orthodox, there were no objections to their implied supremacy over the church. However, Constantine's successors were frequently Arianists or Pagans (Julian). Emperors thought of themselves as both spiritual and temporal authorities and played a leading role in church. Bishops took active parts in civil affairs, and the social teachings of Christianity gradually became incorporated into civil legislation. The Jurisdiction of bishop's courts were originally applied to clerical matters as well as to laity; gradually, particularly in the Barbarian West, it was extended to include secular legal suits.**

**Other heresies of the time included Pelagianism (good works alone attained afterlife); Manichaeism (an off-shoot of the duality of Zoroastrianism, i.e., evil exists in the universe, as does hell);**

**The power of the church and the issues of who controlled it, the emperor and his hierarchy or the church and its clergy remained unresolved and proved a recurring flash point of political controversy. For example, St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (340-397AD) challenged the Roman emperor in 390 AD. Ambrose humbled the Emperor Theodosius (the Great), after the latter massacred 7000 citizens at Thesalonica by refusing him the sacraments. Theodosius eventually repented and thus submitted to the superior authority of the church hierarchy. Conversely, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD the Eastern Roman Emperor coerced the church leadership to recognize the Patriarch of Constantinople as Roman Pope's equal. Gregory the Great (590-604 AD) ultimately established the primacy of Pope at Rome, but by this time Germanic kings controlled the Roman West, not the emperor at Constantinople.**

**The church hierarchy ultimately implemented reforms to monasticism, though most of this was conceived internally within monastic elements and adapted as "standards of behavior." The Rule of Pachomius, 318 AD, placed communal (cenobitic) monasticism under control of the local diocesan Bishop; Benedict of Nursia (480-543), established rules of order and committed monastic communities to Christian service (e.g., the Irish monks who proselytized in Germany). Monastic orders were used by secular authorities to develop abandoned tracts of land. They are credited with developing labor-saving technologies during the early Middle Ages.**

**The crisis in Christian Education can be put very simply = no great literature (no appropriate literature) existed for Christian students to read. Were the "classics" such as Aristophanes or Petronius suitable reading for Christian students? And what about secular writers such as Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero? After centuries in hiding, the catechism of Christian education was limited to the largely unsophisticated writings of the gospels and even these were largely unedited. Christian leaders such as St. Jerome (340-419 AD) emphasized the elevation of**

church scholarship and the propagation of the monastic way of life. Jerome went to Israel, obtained and translated various texts of the Old and New Testament from the best surviving Hebraic, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts available. He used the vernacular Latin of his day to produce the *Vulgate Bible*. A major debate concerned the value of pagan literature to offset the reality of widespread illiteracy within church hierarchy. For this, St. Augustine (354-430) established a moderate path in intellectual training. Augustine's mother was Christian, but he attended pagan school in North Africa. He studied and loved Cicero and lived the life of a dilettante. His teaching career led him to Milan where he came under influence of Ambrose. He converted to Christianity and was sent to North Africa, where he became the Bishop of Hippo. He died during the siege of the Vandals 430 AD. In fully literate Latin, he wrote treatises on all important issues of Christian doctrine. His writings came to dominate Medieval philosophy and theology, and influenced Calvin and Luther as well. His example demonstrated that Christian intellectuals could study the "classics" of the non-Christian past, exploit the best of what classical literature had to offer without compromising their faith.

Ultimately the Barbarian invasions garnered further temporal authority for the papacy in Rome over bishops in the Roman West. Roman popes assumed increasing political power as Roman civic institutions collapsed; other powers were delegated to them by the eastern emperor in Constantinople. Ultimately the Roman pope became more important in local government than Roman imperial officials. The Pope assumed a position of semi independence under Byzantine sovereignty. Gregory the Great recruited his own army to fight the Lombard invasion, and negotiated peace with Lombard king.