

Third and Fourth Century Christian Transformations of the Roman Empire:

The Significance of Imperial Policy

During the third century, the Roman Empire was facing a crisis which caused significant instability and discontinuity among rulers and imperial policy. It is during this crisis that people of Rome - perhaps due in part to the imperial struggles of the crisis - are being exposed to new mysterious religions. These religions proposed new and synchronous approaches to spirituality and especially emphasized concepts that would come to predispose Romans to the teachings of Christianity. The transformation of the Roman Empire to a Christian Roman Empire was at times a slow and brutal process marked by key emperors in the third and fourth centuries: Constantine, Julian, and Theodosios I. The intent of their policies varied and were sometimes more effective than others; we see with Julian that imperial policy wasn't as effective against the spread of Christianity as the pro-Christian policies imposed by Constantine and Theodosios I were at introducing and enforcing Christian significance in Roman society. However, it is clear that by the reign of Theodosios I, the Roman Empire had more distinctly become a Christian society that tolerated pagans instead of the opposite.

Third century crisis marks a time of turmoil in the empire. With little stability at the head of the empire, until Diocletian (284-305CE), the Roman people were no doubt more susceptible to outside influence. However, as significant policy decreed by Diocletian, the heredity principle will serve an important role in the development of the empire, especially as Christianity becomes more relevant. As an attempt to preserve the changes he made to the Roman system and structure, the heredity principle was a policy that enforced professional continuity between father

and son. Diocletian and his policy would play a crucial role in the transformation to a Christian Roman Empire.

During this time, the people of the empire were simultaneously exposed to Christianity and a variety of mystery religions. These mystery religions focused on concepts that prepared Roman people for Christianity. With emphasis on purification, sacred meals, the soul and salvation/rebirth, these religions slowly predisposed and prepared Romans to eventually be more comfortable and accepting of Christian traditions such as baptism and communion.

Religions such as Syncretism were even able to bring different traditions from different religions together as a form of worship. This type of faith would become instrumental as many of these religions start teaching similar doctrine. Zoroastrianism, for instance, is centered on the idea of dualism and judgment. The concept of dualism intersects with other religions thus giving way to Manichaeism which links Zoroastrianism, Mithras, Buddhism, Gnosticism and the teachings of Jesus. The dualist element essentially teaches that the physical body is inherently evil and prone to sin; it imprisons the light of the soul. This faith, invokes the importance of learning the gnosis – redemptive knowledge that will save your soul.

Some of these religions were more direct in their connections to Christianity. Neoplatonism, a religion that builds on the teachings of Plato – particularly his Cave Allegory – is compared and contrasted with Christianity. Neoplatonism likens Jesus to Socrates as the enlightened untrusting and eventually executed figure. Gnosticism – the secret knowledge – was a religion that focused on different interpretations of Christian texts and even supported women clergy. His concept however was challenged and squashed by Tertullian (d. 255) who asserted that women cannot speak in church (let alone hold the position of priest). Tertullian later becomes the father of the widely accepted and practiced form of Christianity.

These mystery religions and their doctrine all emphasize a significant fact about religion in Rome – Christian and non-Christian thinkers are coming to similar theological and spiritual conclusions. Attitudes toward material world (daemonic) are shared and are in agreement that matter resists God. Christianity however will require no formal education, only moral excellence in order to worship – extending its reach to the low and middle class population – aiding further in the transformation of the Roman Empire. During a time of both Christian and non-Christian religions, the overlap between these faiths slowly predisposed the Roman people to accept and appreciate Christian teachings.

As Christianity develops and spreads, it begins to take strong roots in urban areas. Initially only a small portion (10-15%) of Roman society, Christianity was able to establish a considerable presence in the Roman cities, which may have served as a tactical advantage for the spread of its teachings. Christianity had a particular attraction to the lower and middle urban class population and eventually became the faith of people working in the administration and bureaucracy as imperial notaries and clerks. Although a large demographic of Christian worshipers were of the lower and middle classes, most leaders of the church were accepted in society as intellectuals – a sign that there is a developing respect for the religion in the community.

A more serious mark in the transformation of the Roman Empire to a Christian Roman Empire was the reign of Emperor Constantine (306-324 with co-emperor, - 337 as sole emperor). Around the time his father, Constantius, dies in 306, Christianity becomes a more serious political issue and in response Diocletian launches the Great Persecution (302-312) martyring 10,000 Christians including St. Demetrios and St. George. At this time, Constantine is tolerant of Christianity, however in 312 during the battle at Milvian Bridge he is famously acclaimed to

have seen a vision of the Chi Rho (symbol of Christ) and flies flags with that symbol victoriously into battle – famously attributing his success to these Christian symbols. Galerius issues the “Edict of Milan” in 313 which decrees the toleration of Christianity and the end of Christian persecution. As Constantine was still interested in appealing to the pagan population he adopts the name Pontifex Maximus (chief priest of the pagan cult) indicating a commitment to paganism. That being said, Constantine is credited for founding many churches and developing them in the form of basilica courts and begins to bring ritual and sacrifices to interior spaces – a tradition now common in Christian practices. Constantinople comes to be known as the “Christian City” as it is said to have been modeled by angels. His reforms include ending sacred prostitution, exempting clergy from taxes, bestowing privileged rights to Bishops (such as the power to approve manumission slaves) and allowing people to give property to the Church. More interestingly, he removes Emperor Augustus’ penalties for celibacy which indicates a shift in mentality toward a more “pure Christian” orientation.

Theological debate during the reign of Constantine between Arianism (homoiousios – of like essence) and Athanasius (homoousios – of same essence) took place at the Council of Nicaea in 325. In an effort to end the debate, Constantine issues an imperial decree deciding that Athanasius and the homoousios belief are true. Due to the fact that Constantine had Arians in his court, as well as the fact that he was baptized by an Arian, it is speculated that his decree on the Council of Nicaea was a political compromise. However, the outcome of that council (and the decree of the emperor) led to the creation of the Trinity.

Constantine often referred to himself as bishop to those outside the church, peer to apostles, and was successful in spreading Christianity to the army – critical to the spread and security of Christianity. Here we can identify Constantine as a ruler who was officially tolerant

of Christianity, and even favored the faith in many way. He was still committed to pagan traditions, and was clearly still ruling a Roman Empire – as a posed to a Christian Roman Empire.

Emperor Julian, a member of the Pagan intelligentsia, was considered the new Constantine for paganism. He uses his power of court patronage to organize pagan priesthood which he modeled after the Church. As a proponent of paganism, Julian refers to Christianity as “a passing cloud”. Julian attempted to use his imperial policy to create conflict amongst the Christians. Officially, Julian tolerated a diversity of faiths, including heretic Christians and Jews. It is arguable that this policy was a passive political maneuver to insight conflict amongst Christians – which it did. As Julian was aware that Roman cities were important in the political structure of the Roman Empire, he sought to restore them and their aristocracy as an attempt to restore a pagan ruling class. In this way, imperial policy played an instrumental role in Julian’s attack on Christianity and could’ve had a more devastating effect on the spread of Christianity had his reign been extended beyond his murder. However after Julian’s murder, his successor, Jovian (a Christian) countered the policies passed by Julian by instating policies that were more aligned with the Christian policies of Constantine. It is debatable whether Julian’s imperial policies were ultimately ineffective because he was trying to reestablish paganism from the top-down, whereas the Church was more successful due to its ability more widely connect and establish strong grassroots faith in Roman people. Either way, it is evident, in the case of the reign of Emperor Julian, that imperial policy can only be as strong as the longevity of its resolve with succeeding rulers.

Theodosios I “The Great” (379-95) was a Nicene Christian and passed policy that strongly and definitively ordered all Christians to follow the teaching of the Nicene Bishops of

Rome and Alexandria. He called for an ecumenical council in 381 to ultimately establish Nicene (over Arianism) as the only acceptable interpretation of Christian teachings. Theodosios I, while fully accepting Christianity, tolerated paganism although referring to it as a false backward practice. He was able to advantage Christians by appointing them to posts in government and financially assisting churches as well as other Christian institutions – aiding the growth and security of Christianity in the Roman Empire. He also legitimizes Christian violence when he forgives rioters in 387 because they were monks. In 390, Theodosios I ordered the military to put down a riot and in the process killed 7,000 people. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan,

“later intervened and refused to allow Theodosios into the church or to communicate with him. In the end, Theodosios was forced to admit his crime and do penance – a notable example of how a stubborn church leader could take the moral high ground and force a power emperor to bend to his will... It should be noted, however, that this event did not weaken Theodosios’ political or military power in any way” (Gregory, 95).

After this, he passes policy that intended to end pagan practice (both publically and privately) in 391-3. These obvious signs of endorsed Christian dominance throughout society, and even extending to the emperor himself, indicates the sign of a transformation of the Roman Empire to a Christian Roman Empire.

Imperial policy is an important and powerful tool of the emperor. However, against an institution such as the Church, which by the time of Julian and Theodosios I had firmly established roots in Roman society, imperial policy may not have been strong enough to ultimately extinguish this movement. Through the third century, turmoil and various religious exposures predisposed Roman people to the concepts of the Christian faith. The reign of Constantine, although not officially marked by a dominating Christian empire, was in many

ways a significant step for the growth of Christianity. Although, given his decisions which favored paganism as well as Christianity, I would claim that he wasn't attempting to create a new Christian Roman Society, but merely expanding on his own personal passions. Julian's reign was enlightening in that we can observe the powerlessness of imperial policy without longevity especially when facing an established religion such as Christianity. Finally, by the time of Theodosios I, paganism is considered a backward practice, and his imperial policies were outright in favor of Christianity. Theodosios I attempted to create a new Christian Roman Society, and complete Rome's Christian transformation. These key emperors expose imperial policy to be a guiding force which will at times resist and constrain elements of Roman culture and society, but may not be enough to stop the transforming effects of a rising social/religious tide such as Christianity.