

Religion in Ancient Rome

Religion in ancient Rome combined several different cult practices and embraced more than a single set of beliefs. The Romans originally followed a rural animistic tradition, in which many spirits (gods) were each responsible for specific, limited aspects of the cosmos and human activities. The early Romans referred to these gods as numina. For example, there were different numina for ploughing, for horses, and for cattle.

The Etruscans provided the context out of which Roman culture and religious beliefs evolved. See Etruscan mythology. Another aspect of this animistic belief was ancestor worship, with each family honouring their own dead by their own rites.

Early in the history of the Roman Republic, foreign gods were imported, especially from Greece, which had a great cultural influence on the Romans. In addition, the Romans connected some of their indigenous deities with Greek [gods and goddesses](#).

As the Roman Empire expanded, and included people from a variety of cultures, there were more and more gods.

The legions brought home cults originating from Egypt, Britain, Iberia, Germany, India and Persia. The cults of Cybele, Isis, and Mithras were particularly important.

Along with this, the ancient Roman beliefs and practices continued, especially in and around Rome itself. This included the worship of the lares and penates (spirits specific to a family, with altars in the home), festivals such as the Lupercalia and Saturnalia, and a complex system of lucky and unlucky days.

Another important aspect of religion in Roman times was the divinity of the Emperor. More than just being the Pontifex Maximus (the head of the Roman Religion), Roman Emperors endorsed the various popular cult religions.

In an effort to enhance political loyalty among the populace, they often called subjects to participate in the cults and revere the emperors as gods. Examples of this include "The Achievements of the Divine Augustus", which are two large bronze pillars in Rome inscribed with the deeds of Augustus, roman coins where the Emperor is portrayed with a halo or divine glow, temple inscriptions such as "Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea..." (Roman Temple Inscription in Myra, Lycia).

Eventually, Christianity came to replace the older pantheon as the state religion.

[Wikipedia](#)

The origins of Christianity spring from Judaism. Christianity originally developed as an offshoot of Judaism with the followers believing that Jesus of Nazareth was the messiah.

Judaism of the Roman era was comprised of four distinct sects;

1. Sadducees; aristocratic Jews who cooperated with the Roman government;
2. Pharisees; Strict adherents to the Jewish law;
3. Essenes; Messianic group which lived a communal lifestyle and wrote many books including the "Dead Sea Scrolls";
4. Zealots; Militaristic group which was openly hostile to the Roman state and led the revolt of 66 AD

which resulted in destruction of Jerusalem and the massacre at Masada.

Jesus of Nazareth is proclaimed the messiah by his followers. Life of Jesus is outlined in the Gospels. He was born in Bethlehem (C. 3 BC). Raised as a carpenter. Early years are undocumented but many feel he spent some years in Egypt and was possibly educated by the Essenes. He was a follower of John the Baptist. The teachings of Jesus are unusual for the period of time and appealed to all segments of Roman society.

Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament Messianic prophecy. All humans are created equal. One should serve his fellow man. Only God could - and should - avenge wrongs. Humans should respect earthly law. Violence of any kind is wrong.

Jesus was martyred. He angered the Pharisees by his teachings. Charges of heresy were brought against Jesus by the Pharisees during Passover Week. The Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate, was pressured by the Pharisees to execute Jesus after the Jewish court (Sanhedrin) refused to try him. Jesus was crucified by the Romans (C. 30 AD). He was labeled the "Christos" (Anointed One) after his followers claimed he was resurrected.

The immediate followers of Jesus (Apostles) are also martyred for their beliefs.

1. Andrew; crucified on an X-shaped cross in Greece.
2. Bartholomew; Skinned alive.
3. Simon Peter; Crucified upside down in Rome.
4. James the Just; throat was cut by Herod Agrippa.
5. John; Beheaded at Ephesus.
6. Mathew; Crucified in Greece.
7. Thomas; Martyred in India.
8. James the Lesser (Brother of Jesus); stoned to death.
9. Judas Iscariot; committed suicide.

Paul, a converted Jew, is the man most responsible for spreading the Christian faith throughout the Roman empire. Almost 1/3 of the books of the New Testament is attributed to him. Born Saul of Tarsus, he had a conversion on the road to Damascus. His special mission became the conversion of the non-Jew (Gentile) to Christianity.

Religious ceremonies develop slowly into the now accepted Sacraments of the Church.

- Baptism; Symbolized the washing away of sin and rebirth and was popularized early by John the Baptist.
- Holy Eucharist; Symbolized the last communion with Jesus and his followers. This practice became very controversial because of the concept of "Transubstantiation".
- Confirmation; A ritual celebrating adulthood.
- Penance; A confession of sin.
- Ordination; The passing on of power, this sacrament established the authority of church leadership.
- Matrimony; Considered a religious rite. Celibacy of priests came much later.
- Extreme Unction; The last rites before death.

Early Christianity was influenced by other religions.

1. Judaism; The concept of the Messiah and the Old Testament were integral to early Christian thought.
2. Mithraism; A Persian religion associated with Zoroasterianism which had become the unofficial cult of the Roman army. Open only to men, Mithraism seems to have had an impact on early Christian practices including Celebration of Dec. 25 as Jesus' birthday; Celebration of Sunday as the sabbath; (C) Concept of

the baptism of the blood.

3. Stoicism; Acceptance of fate regardless of circumstances was evident during Christian persecutions.
4. Neo-Platonism; Revival of Plato's concept of reality of "ideas" and his concentration on the "last days" affected Christianity.

Early Church organization copied the leadership pattern of the Roman Empire.

1. A "Deacon" led each local congregation.
2. A "Bishop" oversaw several Deacons
3. "Archbishops" developed to see large Bishoprics
4. Eventually the Bishop of Rome became the unofficial leader of the church and gained the title of "Pope"
5. The first Bishop of Rome was Simon Peter, the apostle.

Early persecutions of Christians, although sporadic, were cruel.

1. The Roman government and citizenry was generally tolerant of early Christianity since they posed no threat to their government.
2. The most vocal opponents of the early church came from the Jewish religion.
3. Only when Christians refused to participate in Emperor Worship did they begin to be persecuted in large numbers.
4. Nero was the first emperor to persecute the Christian followers on a large scale.
5. Persecution reached its height during the reign of Diocletian who attempted to systematically eliminate the followers.
6. Christianity finally became legal during the reign of Constantine with the Edict of Milan in 312 AD.

Early heresies concerning the nature of Jesus threaten the new beliefs of the Christian church.

1. Docetists; Followers of Marcion believed that the human body of Jesus was a phantom.
2. Nestorianism; Followers of Nestor believed that God dwelt in the body of Jesus like a temple. Jesus was merely a vessel.
3. Monophysites; They believed that the nature of Jesus was wholly divine.
4. Arianism; This belief proved the greatest challenge to the early church. Led by Arius (256-336), the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, he taught that Jesus was similar to an angel, not human, but not quite God-like. His thoughts had many followers including the emperor Constantine.
5. Gnosticism; Followers believed that the Holy Spirit was superior to either Jesus or God. Their belief in mysticism eventually led to the monastic movement. The Gnostic influence can be seen in the New Testament, particularly the Gospel of John.

Church Councils are held to settle many of the questions of early Christianity.

1. The Council of Nicaea was called in 325 by Constantine to settle the question of the nature of Jesus.
2. The council was attended mostly by eastern bishops.
3. The result was the "Nicene Creed" or the "Apostles Creed" which defined the nature of Jesus in terms of the Trinity.
4. Arianism, although weakened, persisted into the Middle Ages.
5. The Council of Carthage in 397 is held to formulate the "Canon" of the church.
6. Many books attributed to the apostles were present during this era.
7. The council voted on which ones to accept into the "Bible".

8. Those left out became known as the "Apocraphra" or Hidden Books. This included (A) Apocalyptic books by Peter and James; (B) Allegorical books such as the "Shepherd of Hermas"; (C) Several Books of Acts such as that of Andrew.
9. Revelation was accepted by one vote.
10. The Canon was comprised mainly of the four Gospels and letters (Epistles) of the apostles.
11. The literature of the Essenes was completely ignored.

Several church leaders help form the doctrine and theology of the early Christian church.

1. Ignatius (85-107); A bishop of Antioch, he first coined the term "Catholic".
2. Justin Martyr (C 3rd century); A legendary figure whose "Apology" to Antoninus Pious in defense of Christianity had a great impact on future writings.
3. Irenaeus (115-200); Bishop of Lyon, he opposed Gnosticism and was the main promulgator of the cult of the "Virgin Mary".
4. Tertullian (160-220); Bishop of Carthage, he wrote extensively on the morals of the early church. He was eventually excommunicated.
5. Origen (185-254); He wrote over 6000 books in an attempt to harmonize Christian thought with Greek philosophy. He was also later excommunicated.
6. Ambrose (340-397); Bishop of Milan, he established the concept of the church leaders having power over secular rulers.
7. Jerome (340-420); Expert linguist, he translated the Hebrew writings into Latin. His version of the Bible, the "Vulgate", became the official version up to the Renaissance.
8. Augustine (354-430); The greatest of the Latin Fathers, he was a Bishop of Hippo whose writings included the "City of God" and his "Confessions". He is considered the primary theologian of the early church and had great influence on the concepts of original sin, salvation by grace and the sacraments.

Symbols of the early church develop over many centuries.

1. Symbols were used because Christians often hid from the persecutions of the emperors.
2. Early Christians were also hesitant to artistically portray Jesus.
3. First artistic representation of Jesus depicts him as a young man with short hair, void of beard and wearing the rough garment of a Roman peasant.
4. Traditional depiction did not arise until the Middle Ages.
5. The cross was widely used as a Christian symbol until the 5th century.
6. The earliest Christian symbols were the "fish" and the "peacock".
7. Music was not widely used until its standardization by Pope Gregory I (590-604) in the form of "Gregorian Chants".

Monasticism and Asceticism develop as important movements in the early Christian church.

1. Monasticism; A desire to bring about the union of one's soul with God.
2. Asceticism; The complete renunciation of all worldly temptations.
3. These concepts had been in existence as evidenced by John the Baptist and the Essene movement.
4. Jesus taught salvation through renunciation.
5. Stoicism also taught a peace through detachment from worldly things.
6. Monasteries became centers for the preservation of classical learning and the transferral of that knowledge to modern times.
7. Early monastics included;
 - Anthony of Egypt (251-356); Considered the "Father of Monasticism", he lived in a cave for many years;

- St. Simeon (C-4th century); A legendary figure, he reportedly lived atop a pole in Damascus for 30 years;
- Benedict of Nursia (480-543); The head of Monte Casino, he is considered the most important figure in the Monastic movement. He established the rules for monasteries which were followed throughout the Middle Ages.

The reasons Christianity succeeded while others failed:

1. The church doctrines of the Trinity, Virgin Birth, Resurrection, Ordination and Salvation appealed to the common masses.
2. The time of appearance was opportune; Romans were dissatisfied with the old Roman religion and the immorality of the emperors.
3. Message of the church taught Equality for all and Love.
4. The church was open to all including men, women, rich, poor, free and slave.
5. The Christian religion assimilated the Roman culture rather than opposed it.

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