Christianity, A.D. 138

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Christianity, A.D. 138
The First of Three Studies on Religion and Society
BY NOSRATOLLAH RASSEKH

Already in the space of less than a century the operation of the mysterious processes generated by its creative spirit has provoked a tumult in human society such as no mind can fathom. Itself undergoing a period of incubation during its primitive age, it has, through the emergence of its slowly-crystallizing system, induced a fermentation in the general life of mankind designed to shake the very foundations of a disordered society, to purify its life-blood, to reorientate and reconstruct its institutions, and shape its final destiny.

-Shoghi Effendi

While that great body [the Roman Empire] was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived vigour from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol.

-Edward Gibbon

The good emperor Hadrian died in A.D. 138. The Romans had good reason to grieve over the death of a ruler who for twenty-one years had given them peace, prosperity, and an efficient government. Less warlike than his predecessor, Trajan, Hadrian had, by returning Mesopotamia and Assyria to the Parthian king, helped to stabilize the boundaries of the Empire. In Germany he had erected protective walls against the barbarians. In Great Britain he had raised

Hadrian's wall, which
ran across the narrow part of the island, from the Slway Firth to Wallsend on the Tyre, to mark the
northern boundary of Roman Britain.

In avoiding foreign wars Hadrian had been free to concentrate on domestic affairs. He had
raised the material splendor of the Empire through a magnificent building program. He had built for
himself a sumptuous villa at Tivoli, with a fine view of nearby Rome, and a large tomb on the banks
of the Tiber, an edifice that in the Middle Ages was to become the papal fortress of Castel Sant'
Angelo. Hadrian’s Pantheon, like so many other buildings of his time, represented Roman
architecture at its best. Its domed roof of a single enormous concrete case, over 140 feet across, was
indeed a magnificent engineering accomplishment.

The emperor had been an ardent traveler. Twelve out of the twenty-one years of his reign he
had traveled all over the Empire, restoring old cities and establishing new cities in Egypt, Asia Major,
and the Balkans. To correct the unequal distribution of governmental powers between Italy and the

provinces, he appointed more provincials to high offices. Indeed, Hadrian himself and Trajan had
come originally from Italica, a small town in Spain, the first real provincials to become emperors.
During Hadrian’s reign almost half of the senators were of provincial origin.

Not only was life secure in A.D. 138, but it was pleasant. Throughout the Empire, from the
ancient land of Egypt to the new province of Gaul and the newest province of Britain, country
gentlemen lived in unparalleled luxury. Stories and sermons have created the impressions that the
Romans spent half their time in dissipation and the other half in persecuting Christians. But no empire
could have lasted for so many centuries on a diet of undiluted wickedness. No energy would have
been left to create a culture!

The Roman appetite for pleasure was, indeed, colossal. Zest for the spectacular in
entertainment was most luridly expressed in the “games.” Circus Maximus seated at least two
hundred thousand spectators. Chariot racing and gladiatorial contests attracted

enormous crowds. The proletariat formed the bulk of the audience, but boxes were reserved for senators, the Vestal Virgins, and the emperor. Various combinations of contestants provided entertainment. Gladiators were selected from among slaves, though the career was also open to freemen. A man in heavy armor with a short sword could be pitted against a lightly armed adversary who had a net for entangling the other. Groups of men fought each other. Men were matched against beasts and beasts against beasts. At the lunch break, for those who stayed, a minor attraction offered was the spectacle of condemned criminals with inadequate weapons combating hungry animals.

A more usual and more spectacular entertainment was, however, provided by the baths. Some were private, but the most famous were those public mammoth structures, covering the equivalent of a modern city block and accommodating fifteen hundred to three thousand bathers at one time. The old Pennsylvania Station in New York City was modeled on the Baths of Caracalla. There were warm, hot, and cold baths and a prototype of saunas. The heating of the water was accomplished by an elaborate system of furnaces and piping; the Roman achievement in this area alone should be a source of great satisfaction for those modern critics who gauge the level of a culture by its plumbing.

Yet the Roman did not go to the baths just to get clean. There was space for athletic games and for moderate exercise. There were libraries and lecture and concert halls - testimonies to the Greek theory that a sound mind could exist only in a sound body.

The world of the Romans in the year 138 was not limited to spectacular sports and the inexhaustible search for physical pleasures. There was their own Empire to be explored. Many Romans became tourists and went to see the wonders of ancient Greece, the magnificent landscape of Syria, and the awesome sights of Egypt. Like all good tourists they left not only their money but their scribblings on the pyramids and the statues. Traveling on the Mediterranean Sea was safe and easy. A large and comfortable ship could take the traveler from the magnificent harbor built by Claudius at

the mouth of the Tiber to Spain in seven days, to Alexandria in ten. Though there were no good hotels, letters of introduction to wealthy local citizens did guarantee comfortable quarters. A wealthy Roman could send his son to “college” in Athens, then send him a bank-draft, and in a week the young man would be spending the money.

Roads that radiated from the Golden Milepost in the Forum were to be the arteries of the thriving life of Roman civilization for ages to come as they had been for ages past. The speed of travel in 138 was as high as any in Europe or America before the age of the steam engine seventeen hundred years later. The roads were better than any in eighteenth-century Europe.

Postal services were instituted connecting the new provinces with the capital and were placed under the control of the state during Hadrian’s reign. Water was brought from distant lakes by aqueducts whose giant strides across the landscape symbolized the majesty and permanence of Rome. These structures are an awesome sight even today.

Incredible though it may seem, the same people who could indulge in orgies of cruelty produced great works of art, literature, and engineering. While the masses were amused by mimes who reveled in the buffoonery of low comedy, the educated Romans found pleasure in the social comedies of Menander as interpreted by his imitator Plautus.

The literature of the second century, written in both Greek and Latin, was rich and still excelled in purity of style. It had breadth and depth. Tacitus wrote his Annals and his Germania, providing not only information on facts, conditions, and characters of the past but also on thought and judgment about the affairs of man in general. Plutarch wrote his Lives with sharp character studies and, almost a generation later, Suetonius was to write his magnificent Lives of the Twelve Caesars. Among imaginative writers, Juvenal, Apuleius, and Lucian stood out for their satirical descriptions of contemporary society. Galen wrote medical treatises that would be basic texts for more than a thousand years and laid down principles of therapy. Ptolemy, a mathematician and astronomer,

described the earth, drew a picture of Cosmos, and wrote essays dealing with cartography, harmony,
and optics. In philosophy, the age of Cicero and Seneca had passed; but Epictetus (60-140) wrote on
epicureanism; and the best known philosopher of the second century, the emperor Marcus Aurelius,
who composed his Meditations in Greek and eloquently prescribed the Stoic virtues, was yet to come.

The Colosseum, the Circus Maximus, the Tomb of Hadrian, all bear witness to the ability of
the Romans to combine utility and daring engineering techniques, evidenced by the application of
broad and high arches and mighty roof constructions.

Triumphal arches, victory columns, and baths erected during this period are among the
outstanding monuments of ancient times. The relief sculptures adorning all these monuments
represent the greatest of Roman art.1 Free standing statues, though mostly copies of Greek sculpture,
were still among the finest of their kind.

In 138 Rome was a thriving Empire. The Pax Romana extended from Britain to the Caspian
Sea, from the Rhine and the Danube to the Sahara. The Empire stretched more than 1,250,000 square
miles and included more than 100 million people, representing many races, nationalities, and creeds.
The signs of the Empire's permanency seemed apparent everywhere. The Temple of Janus, built by

Hadrian's predecessor Trajan was primarily a soldier. His military exploits are recorded on the famous victory column in
Trajan's forum. The reliefs covering the column unfold a wonderful picture book of his campaigns. The column itself is 100
feet high, and the 150 relief scenes, if unrolled, would be more than 650 feet long.
Numa at the beginning of the Republic, still survived; and the new Pantheon, little more than a
quarter-century old, gave every indication that it would remain unconquered by the passing centuries.

The emperorship of Trajan (98-117) had opened a series of successful reigns under the
Flavian dynasty. This was the era of “Five Good Emperors.” For the next hundred years the new
emperor was always a mature person with wide experience in public affairs, selected because of his

ability and not because of family or place of birth.

Decade after decade of peace and good government had made their mark in a manner rarely
equaled by any imperial power in history. The imperial administration, both central and provincial,
had become the most extensive and detailed structure that the Mediterranean world had known. Its
operations were governed by a professional code of efficiency, reasonable honesty, and support of
Greco-Roman culture. The surviving letters between Trajan and Pliny the Younger, the governor of
Bithynia (in Northwest Asia Minor) are testimonies to the sincere efforts of ruler and agent alike to
secure the welfare of the governed.2

All of civilization seemed embraced in one world, and no one of the generation of Hadrian
could remember when it had not been thus. The Empire had created a concept of "civilization" that
was an impressive phenomenon and perhaps the most enduring legacy of the peculiarly Roman
genius. Benefiting from the many links, including common institutions, laws, customs, commerce
without barriers, and cultural connections, the Hellenizing and Romanizing process was speeded up,
and a feeling of unity unprecedented in history had developed. The long survival of the Empire owed
more to this spiritual unification than to any other factor.3

Hadrian had ruled an empire at its golden age, because it was also primarily an age of law.
Legally far more gifted than the Greeks, the Romans were masters in fitting their statutes to
circumstances of the moment, in adapting laws to the changing needs of new conditions; and,
transcending their limited horizons in science, they could determine principles from any single
instance.

For many centuries Roman law was a mixture of written statutes and unwritten customs. The
Twelve Tables were written, as were many proceedings of the Senate and the Comitias and also the
edicts and rescripts of emperors; but many customs in Rome had the force of law; and the
international code, the jus gentium, was largely unwritten custom.

Under the emperors Trajan and Hadrian specially qualified jurists had collected

and codified
the existing body of judicial decisions and made important additions. An imperial court of appeal was
created. Ideas of a supreme “unwritten” law applicable to all men (jus naturale) were becoming
widely accepted.

See pp. 17-18.
In the West Romanization was usually accompanied by the acceptance of the Latin language and Roman culture. In the East
the Empire remained basically Hellenic in language and outlook, though some Roman customs-for example, gladiatorial
games-were adopted. But the upper classes everywhere more and more assumed the same political and cultural values.

For many generations the praetor’s edict had been one of the chief sources of law. This was a
statement of the praetor (who had been the highest judge under the Republic) of the rules of law that
would apply during his term of office. The edict had tended to become standardized over the years,
but it was still neither wholly official nor completely set. Hadrian asked a leading Roman lawyer to
consult past records and prepare a final and authoritative version of the praetor’s edict. The lawyer
Salvius Julianus produced a version of the edict that became an enduring part of the law. This
formulation of Roman law was one of the great achievements of western man. It was not perfect-no
law is-but it was a great improvement over all earlier legal systems and has probably not been
surpassed by any later ones. It was based on justice and equity - the Romans themselves described it
as “the art of fairness and goodness,” or “a continuing desire to give every man his due.” It was
comprehensive, flexible, and subtle; there were few situations that could not be brought under one of
its rules. Though it did not eliminate class distinctions, it did admit that even the humblest man had
some rights - for example those of slaves against their masters.

Justinian’s great compilation some four hundred years later was largely based on the work of
the second-century jurists; through his code Roman law has, to the present time, affected the
jurisprudence of almost every country in the world.

The death of Hadrian was not the end of an epoch. The three Antonine Emperors - Antoninus

Pius (138- 161), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), and Commodus (180-192) were to carry on the tradition of peace and prosperity for more than half a century. Gibbon believed that the years from 96 to 180 constituted the happiest period in the history of the human race. Today we can question his assumptions, but certainly the Roman Empire during this period did experience the most prosperous and least troubled time in its entire history. The impression is not mine only. Those who lived in the era believed it to be so. Pliny the Elder talked of the “immense majesty of the Roman peace,” and to a writer of the late second century it was

> a world everyday better known, better cultivated, and more civilized than before. Everywhere roads are traced, every district is known, every country opened to commerce. Smiling fields have invaded the forests; Rocks and herds have routed the wild beasts; the very sands are sown, the rocks are planted; the marshes drained. There are now as many cities as there were once solitary cottages. Reefs and shoals have lost their terrors. Wherever there is a trace of life there are houses and human habitations, well ordered governments and civilized life.4

Writing during the rule of Augustus, Virgil had expressed the “mission” of the Empire:

> Others shall beat out the breathing bronze to softer lines ... shall draw living lineaments from the marble; the cause shall be more eloquent on their lips; their pencils shall portray the pathways of heaven, and tell the stars in their arising: be thy charge, O Roman, to rule the

Tercullian, Concerning the Soul, quoted in S. Kutz's The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Medieval Europe (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1955), p. 153.

> nations in thine empire; this shall be thine art, to ordain the law of peace, to be merciful to the conquered and beat the haughty down. 5

Two centuries later the mission had been accomplished. Within the borders of an empire lived Greeks, Slavs, Jews, Phoenicians, Egyptians, North Africans, Iberians, Italians, Celts, Germans, and

many others. The Romans had, out of these strands of many hues, woven a single fabric and created a
civilization not of Rome but of the Roman world, a civilization that seemed destined to go on forever.

IN THE YEAR 138, then, what were the prospects for Christianity, still considered by the
overwhelming majority of the Romans as the faith of obscure enthusiasts, originating from a despised
Oriental people, to triumph over the acme of Greco-Roman civilization? Christianity was as yet still
exclusively a faith and a movement, rather than a Church or an institution.

The birth of Christ and the Christian Faith had passed almost unnoticed by the people of the
time. At His birth the Mediterranean peoples were celebrating an earthly redeemer –Augustus - who
had changed chaos into order, to whom they yielded liberty but from whom they secured the
blessings of peace and prosperity. The Roman world almost universally expressed gratitude for
benefits received from the man who had been born “as a common piece of good luck for all
mankind,” and who had “surpassed all past and future benefactors.” 6

While Christianity was inconspicuously attempting to survive, Augustus during his
remarkable reign had made a spectacular attempt to stem the rising tide of moral change that had
developed in the late Republic by enacting a comprehensive program of social, religious, and moral
reforms. Adultery, previously widely condoned, had become a public crime with severe penalties.
Childless couples were penalized. Special benefits were rendered to those with children. Horace was
elegantly expounding in his Odes the virtues of the Romans of the Augustan Age: frugality, hardiness,
and simplicity. Virgil painted the ideal figure: sober, tenacious, pious, and a slave to duty. Livy
proudly traced the history of Rome from its humble beginnings to his own day, filling it with patriotic
and moral examples.

The best preserved monument of the age, the Altar of Peace, is a simple structure surrounded
by walls decorated with friezes whose serenity and order to this day convey a profound sense of the
Augustan peace. No wonder that Mytilene declared that, “if anything more honorific than all these

enactments is discovered in after times, the zeal and piety of our city will not be lacking in anything
that can deify him even more." 7

Against this background of the Augustan system, Christianity had crept, half hidden, along the
foundations of society. It did not burst out in a flame of conquest as Islam would six centuries later.
Its history was ignored by pagans and Christians alike. To the pagans its very obscurity left little to
chronicle. If it had changed the lives of men and women, they were lives too insignificant to be

Virgil, Aeneid, trans. J. W. MacKail, Modern Library (New York: Random, 1934), p. 126.
Martin Percival Charlesworth, "Some Observations on Ruler-Cult, Especially in Rome," Harvard Theological Review, 1935,
reprinted as a monograph (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), p. 27.
Ibid.

noticed by history. Christianity had not won more than a disdainful paragraph - in Tacitus - at the
hands of Roman historians.8

Christians themselves saw little point in recording the history of their Faith when the second
coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the heavenly kingdom was expected soon. Focusing
on that kingdom, Christ's followers minimized their care about this mortal and transient one. Their
faith centered attention less on this world than on the world to come. Immortality for the individual
was a doctrine shared by some other mystery religions of the pagan world; but only Christianity had
developed - out of the apocalyptic literature of the Jews - the vaster dream of an imminent cataclysm
in which the eternal kingdom would come for all at once.

Christ Himself had written nothing at all. The first Christians, expecting His immediate return,
recorded nothing of their memories and impressions of Jesus until probably two decades after His
crucifixion. Historians cannot determine what the Gospel really was in those few years of His
ministry and soon after. For the historian to discuss in detail the life of Christ would be unsound since
the source material is almost entirely in the Gospels, and those records of the work and the words of
Jesus were not written down until the first flush of hope that He would soon return had passed away.9

A century after the Crucifixion, Christianity was slowly developing a powerful literature of its
own. However, while the scanty texts of the sayings and doings of its Founder were taking the shape
in which we have them now, a Plutarch was writing biographies of the pagan heroes. No Christian
Herodotus had appeared to gather its details, no Christian Polybius to weld it into the world's history
with scientific insight and critical acumen. No Christian Plutarch appeared for another three hundred
years, and then all that the learned Jerome was able to present to us was a few paragraphs on the lives
of the leading Apostles.

Not only are the events surrounding Christ's life historically a blur, but so were at first the
meaning of His mission and teachings.10 He had not erected a system of philosophy. He had issued a
set of principles, each with great power in itself, but left as isolated pronouncements. Furthermore,
they were expressed in parables that could be interpreted in different ways.

The crystallization of creed was affected by the conditions of the time. The crucifixion was, in
the eyes of most observers, just another public execution. The question of the resurrection on the third
day is no more amenable to historical judgment than are the miracles. But what does matter
historically is that Christ's followers did believe and that the small group about the disciples carried
on the propagation of their Faith. Within twenty years after the Crucifixion there were strong

See p. 17.
Even the date of the birth of Jesus is subject to historical debate. He was probably born between 8 and 4 B.C. The Gospel
account has Him born in the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C., and who, moreover, had ordered at the time the
killing of all children under two years of age (Matt. 2: 16). Luke connects the event with a Roman census when Palestine
became a province in A.D. 6. The crucifixion then probably occurred in A.D. 29, 30, or 33.
The first generation of the so - called higher critics of the Bible in the nineteenth century mostly German historians who were
proud of their new techniques of historical research - went too far in their assumption that because the life of Jesus is not
documented in the sense that the life of any great modern personality is documented, we must assume that the Gospel account

is merely fiction. In other words, if it is not documented, it did not exist! Today most Biblical scholars believe that our sources give us a very faithful reflection of the life of Jesus as it seemed to that first generation of Christians. Christian communities in Palestine and others throughout Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece. Most probably there were also Christians in Alexandria and a few other localities.

The early believers were loosely organized. James, the brother of Jesus, was recognized, in a sense, as the head of the movement. The original disciples constituted themselves as a kind of governing council or, at least, a court of appeal. But apart from propagating the Faith, the main activity of the Christian leaders during the second half of the first century was the definition of the basis for the Faith and the formulation of some of the primary theological inferences in documents such as the first three Gospels and the letters of Paul to his contemporaries.

In the year 138 the New Testament had not as yet been arranged and accepted as the fundamental literature of the new religion. The Gospel according to St. Mark was the oldest, written by a follower of St. Peter at Rome, probably around 60. It is not rigorously historical, but it was intended by its author to show that Christ's passion was a proof that God had committed Himself to the flow of human life. The Gospels according to St. Matthew and St. Luke, both of which show traces that their authors knew and used Mark and other sources now lost, date from twenty to thirty years later. 11 The Gospel according to St. John and the Book of Revelation, date probably from the last decade of the first century. Of the four Gospels, three were evidently written by Jews and the fourth (Luke) by a Greek - speaking physician.

But the oldest part of the New Testament is the Pauline Epistles. Yet Paul himself had never seen Christ. Paul had been a strict Pharisee, who at first considered Jesus and His followers as blasphemers against the law and had taken part in the persecution of Christians. But sometime around 38, on the road to Damascus, according to his own testimony:

And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me.

And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest
thou me?

And I answered, Who art thou, lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom
thou persecutest.

And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the
voice of him that spake to me.

And I said, What shall I do, lord? And the lord said unto me, Arise, and go into
Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do.12

Paul turned from persecution to the greatest of Christian missionaries. Perceiving that the Faith
could grow but very slowly in its own birthplace where the Jews were profoundly orthodox, he

One of those missing sources known to scholars as “Q” seems to have been a collection of the words of Jesus Himself, His parables
and sermons.
Acts 22:6-10.
concentrated his missionary activities in the cosmopolitan cities of the eastern Mediterranean. Being a
Roman citizen protected by Roman law and thus free to travel, Paul preached the gospel, or “good news,”
throughout the eastern part of the Empire; and he encouraged and inspired the small Christian
communities by sending letters to the converts.

Before him the early Christians had formed only one of many sects within the larger body of
Judaism. They seemed to have had no clear notion of the persons to whom Christ had directed His
message. James, Jesus’ brother, who directed the central organization at Jerusalem was a conservative
who believed that Jesus had come to fulfill Jewish prophecies. Peter, the chosen disciple, was bolder. He
went on to preach the new Faith in Rome where he was crucified upside down in the Vatican Circus.
The disciple Thomas went outside of the Empire to Parthia and was said to have reached India.
Andrew preached to the Scythians. But Paul was the boldest. He firmly believed that Christian truth
was not a matter of habit or reasoning but of transcending faith. His Epistle to the Romans is

considered by many to be the first great work of Christian theology. He sent it probably from Corinth,
sometime between 56 and 59, when he was contemplating carrying his mission to the West, even to
Spain. For this, Rome was a natural base of operations, and before sailing for Rome he wished to gain
the approval and support of its community of Christians. Thus he wrote his epistle to the Romans,
defining the fundamental theology of Christianity as he saw it. He explained that Christ (from
Christos, the Greek word for Messiah, “the anointed”) was the son of God and that He had died to
atone for the sins of mankind. Man had inherited Adam's original sin; he was inherently unrighteous -
“There is none righteous, no, not one” - but there was a method whereby man could be justified - that
is, “reckoned to be righteous” - even though the Law actually marks him as unrighteous. 13 The
method whereby God delivered man from sin was called grace, the gift of salvation bestowed by God
regardless of man’s merit or desert. God made the life of Christ the symbol of deliverance through
grace: Christ, though sinless Himself, was sent into the world as the bearer of all men’s sins; His
sacrifice on the Cross came so “that the body of sin might be destroyed.” 14 His salvation was
signaled in His resurrection. Human salvation did not automatically result from the sacrificial death
of Christ, but faith - complete trust in God’s grace as revealed in Christ - must be observed by man. If
faith is genuine, the love that led to the sacrifice will be imitated, and man will have carried out the
will of Christ and attained grace. The introduction of faith and love, unrecognized specifically by the
Law, established a new relationship between man and God.

No follower of Christ was as responsible for shaping Christian doctrine as Paul, a thin man
“little of stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, his eyebrows
joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace [who] sometimes ... appeared like a man, and
sometimes he had the face of an angel.” 15 It was Paul, “the Apostle of the Gentiles,” who first
appreciated the universality of the teachings of Jesus. “Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also
of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also.” 16 “For there is no difference

between the Jew and the
Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him.” 17

Rom. 3:10.
14 Rom. 6: 16.
“Acts of Paul and Thekla,” in M. R. James, The Apocryphal New Testament (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), p. 273.
Rom. 3:29.
Rom. 10:12.
The small early Christian community had faced two great obstacles. First, Jewish Christianity
was confined to the Jews and offered no message of salvation for the Greeks or other Gentiles.
Second, early Christian Jews insisted that all believers in the new religion should follow the Law of
the Old Testament to the letter. Thus, the only way to resolve the issue was to free the Christian belief
from the strictness of Judaism, and it was Paul who found the way. He proclaimed that converts need
not follow the detailed prescriptions of the Law. “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body,
whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free.” 18

“For the letter [of the Law] killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” 19 Paul carried the message of
Christian universality to Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and elsewhere, everywhere
founding churches. Without Paul, early Christianity, some historians believe, could have remained
another minor faith among the multitude of creeds and cults to be found throughout the Roman
Empire.

The Acts of the Apostles, the fifth book of the New Testament, describes the transformation
of Christianity from the faith of a sect dominated by Jews and Jewish Law into a religion appealing
principally to non-Jews.

Acts catapults the reader into the troubled world of first-century Palestine. Judaism under the
pressures of foreign domination and successive waves of Greek and Roman cultural influences was a
religion in crisis. Aristocratic Sadducees were a minority committed to a strict literal interpretation of
the Biblical law and the support of Roman rule - and they controlled the Temple in Jerusalem. The
Pharisees denounced the foreigners and

urged the expansion and modification of Biblical law to meet new conditions. Some other smaller
sects such as Essenes urged the possibility of immediate redemption through a new leader, a Messiah.

Acts describes the growth and change of Christians. While the authorship is not certain, most
scholars believe that Luke compiled it, probably sometime after the collapse of the Jewish revolt
against the Romans in 70. The council of the early Christian leaders in Jerusalem that occupied an
important place in the narrative of Acts, took place in 49. Luke was not personally involved in the
earlier events he describes. He relies on the memories of older Christians and a young Christian
tradition handed down to the second and third generation of converts and on a few written accounts of
the first years of the new religion which have since been lost. 20

The death of St. John around 100 brought to an end the Apostolic Age. The governing center
since Jesus' time had remained at Jerusalem, where under James a board of disciples and seven
deacons had acted as administrative officials. But when James was martyred by the Jews before the
Jewish revolt of 66-70, many Christians of Jerusalem were forced to flee the city for a time, and the
Christian churches over the Empire were to become virtually independent. Even further, the central

1 Cor.12:13.
2 Cor. 3:6. Circumcision had been a hindrance that stood in the way of conversion. For adults of those days, without
antiseptics and anesthesia, circumcision was naturally a dreadful and dangerous operation. Paul announced that Greek or
Syrian converts need not undergo circumcision.
See p.12.
unity of the growing Christian communities was crippled when the Romans, after crushing the Jewish
revolt, destroyed Jerusalem in 70. Now each church had to be governed by its own elders or
presbyters and by 100 a leader, the Bishop was becoming dominant in each city.

In fact, the first 138 years of the Christian era were among the darkest in its entire history. In
the course of reducing Christian principles to a logical system, differences of opinion were bound to
spring up. Without a centralized authority or a canonic literature, unity or uniformity could not be

expected.21 Though Christians still felt some sense of a common creed and unity against a hostile
outside world, after the martyrdom of James, they were never able to turn toward the same focal
point. The Churches were small and severely tested by doctrinal disagreements, and suffered from the
dislike of pagans and Jews alike. In different provinces of the Empire there existed different systems
of church government, and as an English Churchman has put it: “the Episcopalian, the Presbyterian,
and the Independent can each discover the prototype of the system to which he himself adheres.” 22
The doctrine of Apostolic Succession - that is, the belief that the powers given to the disciples of
Christ before His ascension, were handed down from bishop to bishop by the sacrament of ordination
- was not universally accepted. Many were against a systematic order that tended to eliminate the
mystical and the ecstatic. Then there were the followers of Marcion (who died around 160), who,
carrying Paul’s doctrines to their extreme, denied any connection between Christ and the God of the
Old Testament. They were spreading widely and forming an independent church.2323 In Asia Minor,
Montanists preached the imminent coming of the New Jerusalem and totally opposed Roman
authority. Bishop Montanus believed that certain living believers were prophets who were continually
receiving direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit. His followers instigated such orgies of prophecy that
the Orthodox Church denied the need for new revelations and declared that all the truths needed for
salvation had been completed upon the death of the evangelist St. John, the last inspired author.

Another major and long-lasting dispute was with the Gnostics, beginning even before the year
100. The Gnostics believed that the mastery of special knowledge (Greek: gnosis) assured salvation.
They proceeded to elaborate complicated myths that constituted the gnosis needed for salvation. They
attempted to incorporate the history of Jesus on earth into their mythological systems. To some
Gnostics Jesus was the savior, but they denied His humanity as an affront to the pureness of divinity -
nor would they accept His bodily resurrection. In 138 the leading Gnostics were Basilides and

Valentinus. It was against them that the orthodox fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch would reaffirm
the historical reality of Christ and His sacrifice as an act of history rather than an allegorical symbol.
Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, in his treatise “Against the Heresies” used the Scriptures to refute the
gnostic separation of human and supernatural in Christ and lead the way for the first systematic
exposition of orthodoxy of belief.

Not until c. 170 was the New Testament, essentially in its present form, beginning to be regarded as authoritative
Scripture rather than the simple evidence of the teachings of Jesus.
22. B. H. Steerer, The Primitive Church: Studied with special reference to the Origins of the Christian Ministry
(New York: Macmillan, 1929), pp. viii-ix.
Marcion, who was the bishop of Sinope (in Asia Minor), condemned the God of the Old Testament as the god of darkness and
the Testament itself as a record of abominations. Even among the books of the New Testament he accepted as binding only the
Gospel according to Luke and ten Epistles of St. Paul. It was in response to this challenge that the orthodox church defined its
canon of sacred writings, virtually the modern Bible, as the basic source of Christian teaching.

In Palestine the Jewish-Christian church at Jerusalem continued under a regular line of leaders
after James until the great revolt of 132-35. But the imperial ban on Jewish inhabitation of the city,
thereafter, helped to reduce the Christians of Palestine who fully accepted the Judaic Law to a minor
sect called Ebionites.

It was not just the internal disputes that threatened the survival of Christianity. Externally, in
the year 138 Christians were facing strong challenges from other religious movements and opposition
from the imperial government. Like the Jews, Christians made no compromises with Roman
authorities or paganism - either with pagan polytheism or pagan morality. Early Christians viewed
themselves as the new Israel, members of a holy nation, a chosen people facing an unbelieving and
threatening world. From the beginning until the reign of Constantine the Great some three hundred
years later, Christian communities remained an illegal, sometimes persecuted sect within the Empire.

Romans looked suspiciously at people who were exclusive, claimed sole

possession of the
right paths of life, denied all gods, and had such an unusual scale of values.
They were suspected of
all sorts of horrid crimes such as incest, infanticide, and ritual murder.
There was a wide gulf between
the basic principles of Christianity and those of classical civilization.
Humility, charity, forgiveness,
loving one's neighbor as one's self, these were not the accepted moral
standard of the Greco-Roman
world.

ROMANS were a tolerant people. But there was a practical limit to their
religious freedom,
which after all was based on no ideal of religious liberty, and certainly not
on any concept of
separation of church and state. Rome deified the emperor to give its motley
collection of peoples a
common allegiance - something like a national flag as a symbol of unity.
Augustus had taken the step
toward associating an element of divinity with his position - a public worship
of two divinities (Rome
and emperor). Thereafter, officially each emperor was designated as divus after
his death - deified by
an act of the Senate. It was an attempt to make the emperor a transcendent
being and to provide a
metaphysical basis for legitimacy and power.

But like the Jews who had refused to sacrifice to Baal, the Christians refused
to adore the
emperors. They even went beyond that. Inasmuch as the emperor pretended to be a
god, he was, they
said, in fact a devil.

Thus Rome considered Christians unpatriotic and subversive. Persecution of
Christians was
often in the form of social and economic ostracism. Contrary to the popular
concept, violent physical
persecutions were sporadic and came in some half dozen major waves over three
hundred years - and
were subject to great local variation.

The best known came very early in the year 64 and was described by Tacitus as a
deliberate
attempt of Nero to find a scapegoat for the disastrous fire in Rome. Tacitus'
narrative also indicates
how most cultivated pagans regarded the new sect. Christians were considered an
unpopular social
group rather than a religious minority:

Therefore to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the
utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men loathed for their vices, whom the crowd sty led
Christians. Christus the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of
Tiberius, ... and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out
once more, not only in Judaea, the home of the disgrace, but in the capital itself, where all
things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed
members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted,
not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision
accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs;
or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed, were burned to serve as lamps
by night. 24

To Tacitus Christians were criminals, but in another generation an able and conscientious
member of the Roman ruling class had some doubts. Pliny the Younger wrote his emperor, Trajan
(98-117), from Bithyria in Asia Minor where he had gone as governor, that he was puzzled about
Christians. He had not found any evil among the Christians accused before him of various wrong
doings, except their refusal to worship the emperor or other gods. Should he punish them, he asked
the emperor, just because they admit to being Christians, or must he have evidence of the horrid
crimes that they were alleged to have committed. Many, he wrote the emperor, recanted and
worshiped Trajan's image, but he went on:

They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt or their error, was, that they were in the
habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses
a hymn to Christ, as to a god and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked
deeds, but never to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a
trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to
separate, and then reassemble to partake of food - but food of an ordinary and

innocent kind.
... I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth with the assistance of
torture, from the female slaves, who were styled deaconesses; but I could discover nothing
more than depraved and excessive superstition. 25

Emperor Trajan's reply directed ·the governor not to search out Christians but to punish any who had
been properly indicted:

No search shall be made for these people; when they are denounced and found guilty,
they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that when the party denies himself to
be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is, by adoring our gods) he shall be
pardoned on the ground of repentance even though he may have formerly incurred
suspicions. Information without the accuser's name subscribed must not be admitted in

Tacitus, The Annals, trans. John Jackson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1937), pp. xv-xliv.
Pliny, Letters, trans. W. Melmoth and rev. W. M. L. Hutchinson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1947), Book X, xcvi.
Pliny also reported but denied the popular tales that Christians engaged in lewd activities after their celebrating agape!

evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means
agreeable to the spirit of the age. 26

The next systematic persecution of Christians, which lasted for three years, was not to take
place until 235 when Maximinus was the emperor.27 But that period of persecution was confined to
Palestine and the city of Rome. Emperor Decius instigated a general persecution in 250, and the last
and greatest was to take place under Diocletian in the year 303.

However, the Roman Empire, though unaware, was helping rather than hindering the
movement by providing security and order. Roman peace facilitated communication. From its very
beginning Christianity had been a missionary faith, as the Acts of the Apostles make clear; and for
the missionaries facilities for moving about by land and sea were better than they had ever been and
better than they would be again for many centuries. Those Christians who scorned arms were

protected by the might of the Roman legionaries in their pioneering efforts to convert others.

Thus, though despised and suspected, Christians still succeeded in increasing their numbers.
The movement had been well implanted in the cities and at places even in the more conservative
countryside, though it had made few converts among the ruling or even the wealthy class. Few
intellectuals had embraced the Faith. In 138 the imperial cult still remained a powerful focus for
political and economic loyalty. Yet as men were turning more and more into political ciphers, their
attachment to the state of religion was weakening. Many thinkers and artists of the Empire reflected
the contemporary spiritual uneasiness and void and searched for meaning in a vast, materialistic
world. Some turned to skepticism. Sextus Empiricus in his Outlines of Pyrrhonism set down a
rounded system of skepticism; it was considered a comfort to men to point out that “nature’s chief
blessing, death” ended their existence. 28 Others accepted predestined Fate by their belief in astrology,
or sought to blandish its forces by magic. Among the upper classes philosophy was used to provide a
guideline for moral behavior, and the Stoics in particular tried the thoughtful life of self-scrutiny. But
philosophers could offer little beyond negative, rationalistic, pessimistic preachings; and philosophy
seldom filled the spiritual void in the heart of man. The most direct expression of man’s continuing
search for meaning has always been in the field of religion.

In 138 the Roman world had, indeed, its share of mystic religions. The search for meaning
was reflected in the popularity of oracles and miracle workers and the rise of a host of emotional,
personal faiths. To some, Babylonian astrology seemed an answer. Even Ptolemy wrote a book about
it, the Tetrabiblos. To others more personal faiths were the answer. From Egypt had come the
Hellenized cult of Isis, a cult that provided the consolation of a future life, a consoling mother-figure
in Isis herself, a mystic link with the great Egyptian past, and abundant miracles. Membership was
symbolized by baptism that removed the initiate’s sins. Sarapis, Isis’ consort, judged the true believer
upon his death and gave him everlasting life. Isis, Sarapis, and their child

Harpocrates formed a

Ibid., xcvii.
Because of the general prosperity of the second-century Empire, Roman officials frowned on popular violence against Christians
except in a few instances where local governors were permitted persecutions to keep their provinces quiet. Thus we have the general
account of persecution in Vienna and Lyons in 177 under Marcus Aurelius where the burned remains of Christians were thrown in
the Rhone River to prevent their proper burial.
Pliny the Elder, Natural History, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), Vol. II, Book VII, 190, p. 635.
sacred trinity. Each fall Sarapis was ritualistically killed and resumed life on the third day. The cult of
Isis was popular everywhere. Next to Hadrian's magnificent villa was an Egyptian garden dedicated
to Isis and Osiris and filled with their monuments. Symbols of the Egyptian goddess have been found
on the banks of the Seine, the Rhine, and the Danube.

From Iran came Mithraism with its characteristic Persian dualism and the eternal tension
between the forces of light and darkness, Mazda and Ahriman. It promised rewards and punishments
in future life, and Mithra himself was regarded as the intermediary between God and man. Its major
ritual act involved the sacrifice of a bull, and the believers were baptized in the bull's blood. The
regular services of priests included a consecrated bread and drink. In the frontiers, Mithraism was the
favorite religion of the legionnaires, and many legions had their underground chapel where Mithra's
triumph was celebrated. A third cult, that of Cybele or the Great Mother, was brought to Rome
officially in 204 B.C. Each spring, on 25 March, the coming of the season was celebrated as the
resurrection of her consort Attis.

In 138 Christianity to many Romans seemed but one of the mystery sects, and a Christian,
viewing the world around, could well have been overwhelmed by the obstacles that everywhere
prevented the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. He was a member of a minority sect,
suspected by the government, despised by its citizens, and challenged by other cults.

By the end of the second century the church writer Tertullian (c.160 - c.230) was to tell the

pagans: “We have filled your whole world, cities, islands, country towns, even the camps, the tribes, the boards of judges, the palace, the Senate, the bar. We have left you only your temples.” 29 But this was more a statement of hope than an expression of reality. One hundred years after Tertullian’s boast, Christians constituted no more than 10 percent of the population of the Empire, and 165 years after the death of Hadrian, Diocletian was to launch the harshest persecution of Christians yet. He ordered all Scriptures to be surrendered so that they could be burned. Churches were destroyed, and all Christian worship was suspended. Christians were stripped of civil rights and political privileges and were under constant threat of torture and death.

While this was happening to Christians in 303, who could have foreseen that within only nine years Emperor Constantine would grant freedom of worship to all Christians and would recognize the Church as the legal body before the law, a fact that meant the Church could not only hold property but accept bequests and have its own ecclesiastical courts? Who could have foreseen that the Emperor himself would triumph in a battle under the Christian emblem and would be baptized a Christian, and that at Nicaea, in the year 325, he would preside over the first ecumenical conference of Christ’s Church and sign the Nicene Creed as the basic document of Christian belief. 3030 Who could have predicted that before the century was over Theodosius the Great (379-95) would make Christianity the state religion of the Empire?

29 Quoted in Harry J. Carroll, Jr. et al., ed., The Development of Civilization (Chicago: Scott, 1961), I, 15 1.
Constantine was not baptized in fact until he was virtually on his deathbed, perhaps because by delaying he felt he could avoid the possibility of committing further sin, since Christians believed that baptism washed away all sins committed before baptism.

THE TRIUMPH of a once obscure, despised sect of “simple religious enthusiasts” in a mature, well-organized, rich, and intellectually sophisticated society is one of the most dramatic facts of history, subject to many different interpretations and impossible fully to explain.

Theology insofar as it concerns itself with historical events, transfers

history from the realm of human action to that of divine grace and thus interprets the phenomena of time and change in terms of timeless and unchanging Deity. Human effort falls, in reality, outside of the range of humanity and is not significant in the unfolding of God’s will. Man thus becomes a spiritual robot, moving about as programmed by his Creator and is not accountable for the direction of his movement or the consequences of his action.

On the contrary, a revealed religion cannot be studied strictly by naturalistic-historical methods. Historical explanations can be given, and great generalizations are, indeed, tempting to the historians, but they cannot be proved. History can never explain all the conditions under which a revealed religion is likely to emerge.

Historians have provided us with some very reasonable explanations for the final triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire. They have pointed out that in the century between the death of Marcus Aurelius (180) and the accession of Diocletian (284) the Empire was beset by the collapse of constitutional government; that the turbulence on the Persian and German frontiers caused the militarization of the imperial administration; that increased taxes, inflationary policies, and the enforced recruiting necessary to support the army and the bureaucracy shattered economic prosperity; that Roman citizenship, as it became more and more common, was no longer the cause of privilege and pride but of financial and military burdens that most Romans wanted to avoid and many abhorred; that the Roman army acted no longer as the guarantor of the Pax Romana but became involved in the political game of emperor-making; and that while the Empire floundered in anarchy Christianity made a sustained effort to win converts, build an organization to keep scattered groups in couch with each other, provide some uniformity of faith and morals, and imposed a new standard of virtue that furnished a corrective to the lurid imperial sins. Historians further inform us that, as the social structure of the Empire weakened, individual Christian churches furnished their members and converts a strong social and psychological unity and that Christ's message of

personal immortality,
the rewards of heaven, a lofty moral code, and sharing in loving kindness with one's fellows on the
earth, provided for His followers that feeling psychologists today rather bleakly call "personal
identification."

Historians have explained that the rise of Rome as the major Christian center in the West
coincided with the progressive erosion of its secular power, that as the Rome of the Caesars fell, the
Rome of the Papacy remained, that the City of God was erected over the ruins of the City of Man.
The Pax Romana disappeared in the West, but a new international order had already emerged that
progressively filled the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Roman state. The Church,
having dealt for centuries with persecution, internal division, and external challenges, had acquired
the spiritual resiliency and the store of political skill with which it was able to organize Europe after
the barbarian invasions, to salvage much of the culture of the Greco-Roman world, and ultimately to
create a whole new civilization of its own.

But all these historical explanations are pale abstractions before the fact that Christ's message
prevailed because it won its way into the hearts of living men and women. Its appeal was not a
"rational" but a "spiritual" one. It triumphed because the power of its spiritual force could no longer
be denied.

In the year 138 a Christian could well have become overwhelmed by all the obstacles around
him. But he knew that Christ would return. Had He not told His followers: "There be some standing
here, which shall not taste death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom"? 3131 To him
"heaven" was no mere hope; "hell," no mere threat. They were, like the Second Coming, certainties.
He acted upon his faith and did not react to the outside forces. Acting upon his faith, he went about,
quietly and obscurely, to do his share to bring about the promised day. Persecution and threat of
persecution kept the unbelievers out. Conscious of the reality and immediacy of the emotional tie that
Christianity forged between him and Christ, and among all those in the

Christian brotherhood, the
follower of Christ became the “Evangel” who longed to share his “good news” with Jews, Greeks,
Romans, and all the varied folk of the Empire who were willing to listen - how could any historian
put all of this in the cold words of history books? Christ had brought the Spirit and the guidelines; and
fortified and guided by that Spirit, humble men, unnoticed by history - Peter, James, Paul, Luke,
Matthew, and John - became the architects and the builders of a whole new civilization that was to be
the foundation of Western society for the next two thousand years.

In those dark and seemingly hopeless early centuries this “multitude of obscure enthusiasts”
did far more to change the course of history and profoundly affect the life of Western man than the
combined efforts of all of Plutarch’s heroes, all of the Roman emperors - the “Five Good” ones and
all the bad ones - and all of the classical philosophers and intellectuals combined. How can a historian
explain “the operation of the mysterious processes” generated by Christ’s creative spirit that brought
about such a transformation? All that he can write is that it happened.

Matt. 16:28. The doctrine of the Second Coming is known technically as a chiliastic belief, for this promised reign of Christ on earth
was to last one thousand years.

— Christianity, A.D. 138 (Used by permission of the curator)