

## 15: Two Religions Stress, Religion, and System Change

### Background

When one society conquers another, it usually tries to impose its main **patterns of action** and **shared ideas** on the conquered peoples. However, when Rome conquered Greece, in many ways the two civilizations merged. Leading Romans—especially those considered “philosophers”—spoke Greek as well as Latin, and often wrote in Greek.

Both nations worshipped most of the same gods, although using different names for them. So, except for some local variations, Greeks and Romans had the same religion. The twelve most important gods and goddesses:<sup>1</sup>

Greek	Roman	Description
Zeus	Jupiter	Lord of the sky and supreme ruler of the gods. Known for throwing lightning bolts.
Poseidon	Neptune	Ruler of the sea. Brother of Zeus. Carried a three-pronged spear called a “trident.”
Hades	Pluto	Ruler of the underworld and the dead. Brother of Zeus. Had a helmet which rendered its wearer invisible.
Hestia	Vesta	A virgin goddess and sister of Zeus. No distinct personality or part in myths. Goddess of the Hearth, the symbol of the home.
Hera	Juno	Zeus's wife and sister. Protector of marriage, spent most of her time punishing the many women Zeus fell in love with. Likes cows and peacocks.
Ares	Mars	God of war and son of Zeus and Hera. Likes vultures and dogs.
Athena	Minerva	Daughter of Zeus alone. Wisdom goddess, sprang from his head full-grown and in full armor. The protector of civilized life, handicrafts, and agriculture. Invented the bridle, and first to tame the horse. Likes Athens, olives, and owls.
Apollo	Apollo	Son of Zeus. Master musician, archer god, healer, god of light, god of truth, sun god. A busy god who likes the laurel tree, dolphins, and crows.
Aphrodite	Venus	Daughter of Zeus. Goddess of Love and Beauty. Likes the myrtle tree, doves, sparrows, and swans.
Hermes	Mercury	Son of Zeus. Wore wings on his sandals and his hat, thus was graceful and swift. God of commerce, eloquence, poetry, communication.
Artemis	Diana	Daughter of Zeus and Apollo's twin sister. Lady of wild things, goddess of the hunt and childbirth. As Apollo is the Sun, Artemis is the moon.
Hephaestus	Vulcan	Son of Hera, God of Fire. The only ugly and deformed god. Makes armor and weapons forged under volcanoes.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://mistupid.com/mythology/> (with our thanks)

These were the main gods, but there were many more. The Internet *Encyclopedia Mythica* lists a total of 54, and this doesn't include many minor locally-worshipped gods. Most Egyptian gods were also considered by Greeks and Romans to be the same as or similar to those in the table on page one. The Egyptian goddess Isis was adopted by Greeks and Romans and became important in many parts of the Roman Empire.

To people today, all this religious complication may seem strange and unnecessary, even ridiculous. To the Romans and Greeks, it was serious—deadly serious.

## Investigation: Reasons for Roman Religion

Why were the Romans and the Greeks religious? The data boxes that follow describe traditional religious patterns of action followed by Romans and Greeks.

***Make a table with two columns. Label the left column "Pattern of action," and the right "Reason for pattern."***

***In the left column, describe each action pattern in a few words.***

***Identify or infer why each pattern developed, and summarize your conclusions in the second column. Each pattern may be related to a significant problem that the action is attempting to solve or avoid, or the pattern may provide some other benefit, such as time off or special foods for workers.***

"An offering to Jupiter before sowing," a ritual described by Cato the Elder, 160 BCE:<sup>1</sup>

The offering is to be made in this way: Offer to Jupiter Dapalis [*Jupiter of the feast*] a cup of wine of whatever size you wish. Observe the day as a holiday for the oxen, their drivers, and those who make the offering. When you make the offering, say as follows: "Jupiter Dapalis, it is due and proper that a cup of wine be offered you, in my home among my family, for your sacred feast; for that reason, be honored by this feast." Wash your hands, and then take the wine and say: "Jupiter Dapalis, be honored by this feast and the wine that is placed before you." If you wish, make an offering to [*the Goddess*] Vesta. The feast of Jupiter consists of roasted meat and an urn of wine. Present it to Jupiter religiously, in the proper form.

After the offering is made, plant millet, panic grass [*another grain*], garlic, and lentils.

**Note:** Between 509 and 384 BCE food shortages affected Rome about one year in nine; between 123-50 BCE, one in five years. Some shortages were caused by weather, others by war or other disorder interfering with food collection and distribution.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/romrelig3.asp>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unrv.com/book-review/famine-food-supply.php>

Livy (writing about 10 CE) describes how *Magna Mater* (“Great Mother,” also called Cybele, an ancient goddess from what is now eastern Turkey) came to Rome:<sup>1</sup>

(204 BCE). About this time the citizens were much disturbed by a religious question which had recently come up. Owing to the unusual number of showers of stones [*meteorites?*] which had fallen during the year, an inspection had been made of the Sibylline Books [*a collection of verses from oracles, thought to predict future events*], and some oracular verses had been discovered which announced that whenever a foreign foe carried war into Italy he could be driven out and conquered if the *Mater Magna* were brought from Pessinos [in Phrygia] to Rome...

Therefore, to more quickly assure the victory which the fates, the omens, and the oracles all predicted, they began to think out the best way of transporting the goddess to Rome. [*Paragraphs that follow describe bringing the goddess—a statue or sacred meteorite—by ship to the city, the procession and placing the statue in a Roman temple for worship.*]



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cybele> (Roman statue, about 50 CE) Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Strabo, *Geographia*, written about 20 CE:<sup>2</sup>

On the road between the Tralleians and Nysa is a village of the Nysaians, not far from the city Acharaca, [*now Salavatli, Turkey*] there are temples sacred to Pluto and Kore, a costly sacred temple square, and also the Charonium [*sacred place dedicated to Charon*], a cave that lies above the square. This cave has a wonderful nature, for they say that those who are diseased and seek the cures prescribed by these gods journey there and live in the village near the cave among experienced priests. These priests, on their behalf, sleep in the cave and through dreams prescribe the cures. These are also the men who invoke the healing power of the gods. And they often bring the sick into the cave and leave them there, to remain in quiet, like animals in their lurking-holes, without food for many days. And sometimes the sick give heed also to their own dreams, but still they use those other men, the priests, to initiate them into the mysteries and to counsel them. To all others the place is forbidden and deadly.

<sup>1</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*, <https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/romrelig2.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Strabo, *Geographia*, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/personalrelig.asp>

Livy describes a legendary event in the early history of Rome:<sup>1</sup>

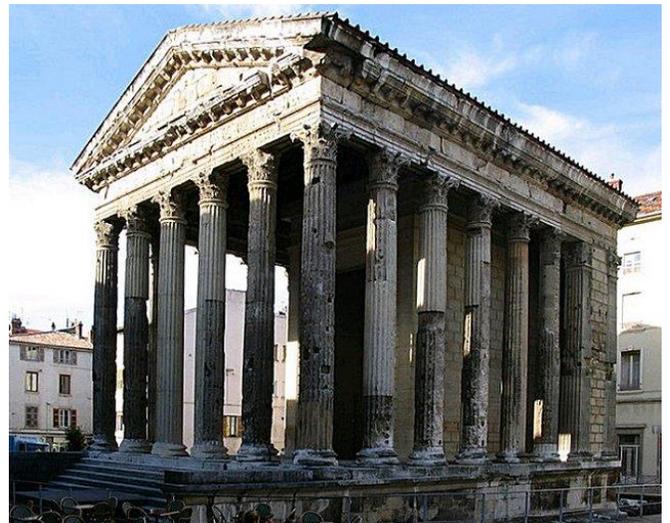
Soon a disease caused great distress, and made men unwilling to bear the hardships of military service. The warlike king [*Tullus*], however, would not allow soldiers to avoid their duties. He thought, too, that it would be healthier for the soldiers to be in the field than at home.

At last he himself was seized with a lingering illness. His fierce and restless spirit was broken by the weakness of his body. Before this happened, he thought that devotion to sacred things was unnecessary for a king. Now, suddenly, he became a prey to every sort of religious terror, and filled the city with religious observances.

The people wanted to bring back the condition of things which existed under Numa, for men felt that the only help that was left against sickness was to obtain the forgiveness of the gods and be at peace with heaven. According to tradition, the king, when examining the commentaries of Numa, found there a description of certain secret sacrificial rites paid to Jupiter Elicius [*Jupiter who calls forth lightning*]. He went into private to do these rites, but he left out part of the ritual, or did it in the wrong way. Not only was no sign from heaven given to him, but Jupiter was angry because of the false worship rendered to him, and he burnt up the king and his house by a stroke of lightning.

An inscription found at Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum, in Turkey), dated after 2 BCE:<sup>2</sup>

Since the eternal and deathless nature of the universe has perfected its immense benefits to mankind in granting us as a supreme good, for our happiness and welfare, Caesar Augustus, Father of his own Fatherland, divine Rome, Zeus Paternal, and Savior of the whole human race, in whom Providence has not only fulfilled but even surpassed the prayers of all men: land and sea are at peace, cities flourish under the reign of law, in mutual harmony and prosperity; each is at the very peak of fortune and abounding in wealth; all mankind is filled with glad hopes for the future, and with contentment over the present; it is fitting to honor the god [*emperor*] with public games and with statues, with sacrifices and with hymns.



Above: The Temple of Augustus and Livia (his wife), built at the end of the 1st century BCE, still stands in the city of Vienne, France:

<http://www.touropia.com/ancient-roman-temples/>

<sup>1</sup> Livy, op. cit. 1:31 <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Livy/Livy01.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mircea-eliade.com/from-primitives-to-zen/215.html>

Written about 110 CE:<sup>1</sup>

Some people attend the festival of the god out of curiosity, some for shows and contests, and many—the market folk—bring goods of all sorts for sale, some of whom display their crafts and manufactures. Some make a show of some special learning; many, of works of tragedy or poetry; many others, of prose works. Some draw worshipers from remote regions for religion's sake alone, as does the festival of Artemis at Ephesus, venerated not only in her home city, but by Hellenes and barbarians.

**Note:** In many places, the only time poor people were able to eat meat was after sacrifices of animals to the gods at religious festivals, when they received a share of the sacrifice as part of the celebration.

Written about 220 CE:<sup>2</sup>

Most men spoil themselves at festival time and holy days, and arrange for drinking and parties, and give themselves up completely to pipes and flutes and different kinds of music and in every respect indulge in drunkenness and in satisfying their desires.

### Hymns of Orpheus<sup>3</sup>

Two of many hymns, (probably written second or third century CE). Each hymn heading cites the kind of incense to be burned—“fumigation”—when the hymn is sung.

#### II. To the Goddess Prothyraea (*Diana*)

*The fumigation from storax*

O honored Goddess, hear my prayer  
For labor pains are in your care.  
Women, when stretched upon the bed of grief,  
In you, as in a mirror, view relief.

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Assisting Goddess, great respected power  
Who brings relief in labor's most-feared hour;  
Blessed Diana, hear, accept my prayer,  
And give the infant child your constant care.

#### XX. To Jupiter

*The fumigation from frankincense and manna*

I call the mighty, holy, splendid, light,  
Aerial, dreadful-sounding, fiery-bright,  
Lightning through vivid clouds with crashing  
noise,

Untamed, to whom feared anger may belong,  
Pure, holy power, all-parent, great and strong  
Come, with kindness here these rites attend,  
And grant the mortal life a pleasing end.

<sup>1</sup> Dio Chrysostom, *Orations*. <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/personalrelig.asp>

<sup>2</sup> *Clementis Recognitiones*, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/personalrelig.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Taylor, Tr., *The Mystical Hymns of Orpheus*, (1824) (adapted)  
<http://www.theoi.com/Text/OrphicHymns1.html>

Roman Temple of Isis, Sabratha (near Tripoli), Libya, North Africa:<sup>1</sup>

“The glory of the site [*Sabratha*] was an enlarged temple of Isis, set some way to the east of the city center. It rose on the very edge of the shore, where its portico of Corinthian columns still stands just above the beach. The site was particularly favored for the goddess of the sea and her festivals, which prayed for calm sailing.”



<http://www.hiddenhistory.co.uk/publications/destinations/libya/>

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<sup>1</sup>Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1986) p. 74

## Summarizing: Roman Religion

If you completed unit 12, “Early Rome,” you investigated situations in which people believed they lacked sufficient autonomy—control over their own fate. This is a major cause of stress for humans, and is closely related to important patterns of action, including worship rituals.

***Look over your table of religious patterns of action and reasons for them. Summarize your investigation by developing a general statement describing relationships between times of stress due to lack of autonomy, and Greek and Roman religion.***

***Discuss these questions and record your conclusions:***

***If a group of people refused to worship the gods and sacrifice to them, what reaction would the gods probably have, according to the Romans?***

***What attitude would Romans probably have toward people who refused to worship and sacrifice to Roman gods?***

## Investigation: Roman Authorities and Christianity

During the first century CE, a new religion—Christianity—began and grew, soon having followers all over the Roman Empire. The new religion started in Judea, among the Jews, as a variation of the Jewish religion. Judea was part of the Roman Empire in this period.

The center and founder of this new religion was Jesus, considered “Messiah,” one chosen by God to be a “savior.” (The Greek word for Messiah was *Christós*.) Jesus was a religious teacher eventually executed by Roman authorities (with the approval of Jewish leaders). His followers believed that he came back to life and ascended into heaven.

His death did not stop the formation and growth of the new religion. Although it met resistance and persecution, Christianity spread rapidly and widely over much of the empire.

***From the following accounts, identify (1) Roman attitudes and actions toward Christians, and (2) the characteristics of Christians, as seen by “outsider” Romans. Write summaries of your conclusions.***

The historian Tacitus, writing about 116 CE, described events involving Christians a half-century earlier:<sup>1</sup>

*In earlier passages Tacitus described the fire that destroyed Rome in 64 CE, and noted that Emperor Nero was blamed for the fire by the public in the city. Tacitus describes some of Nero's and his authorities' actions after the fire:*

The next step was to seek means of soothing the gods, and authorities consulted the Sibylline Books as a guide. The books indicated what to do, and prayers were offered to Vulcan, Ceres, and Proserpina. Juno, too, was given prayer by the matrons, first, in the Capitol, then on the nearest part of the coast. From there water was obtained to sprinkle the temple and image of the goddess. And there were sacred banquets and nightly vigils celebrated by married women.

But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the calming of the gods, did not end the disturbing belief that the fire was the result of an order [by Nero].

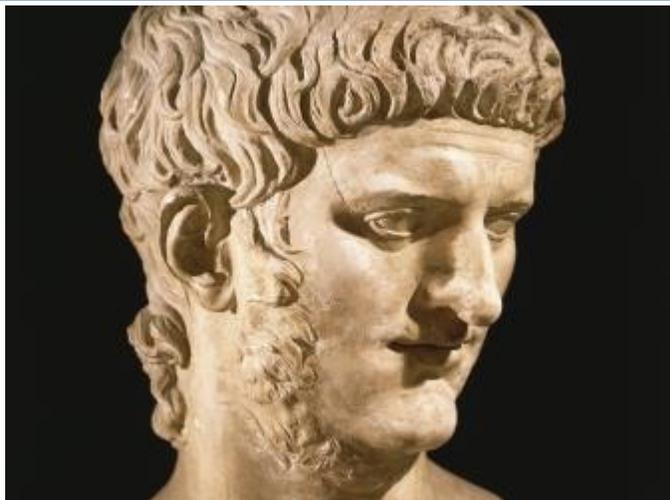
Because this idea was spreading, Nero fastened the blame for the fire on a group called Christians, and inflicted the most elaborate tortures on them, for they were hated for their terrible practices. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty [death by crucifixion] during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.

This most trouble-causing superstition, stopped for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.

An arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty. Then, based on their testimony, many more were convicted, not of the crime of setting fire to the city, but of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had ended.

Emperor Nero ►

<http://cdn.history.com/sites/2/2014/01/122227072-AB.jpeg>



<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacitus\\_on\\_Christ](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacitus_on_Christ)

Pliny the younger, while a Roman governor (province of Bithynia, in what is now northwest Turkey, on the Black Sea coast), wrote to Emperor Trajan (around 110 CE):<sup>1</sup>

My lord, I usually ask for your guidance when I'm faced with a problem and don't know what to do. You are the best possible guide when I hesitate, the best teacher when I lack knowledge. I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the usual rule to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have hesitated, not knowing whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance [*i.e. return to Roman religion*], or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I questioned them as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I questioned a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment. Those who persisted I ordered executed, for I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible unreasonableness surely deserve to be punished. There were others who confessed to having the same silly ideas; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

An anonymous document was passed around containing the names of many persons [*accusing them of being Christians*]. Those [*named in the document*] who denied that they were or had been Christians, I tested by requiring them to:

- > Worship the gods in words I dictated,
- > Offer prayer with incense and wine to your image, (which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods), and
- > Curse Christ. (None of those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do this.)

These [*who did what I asked*] I thought should be set free. Others named by the informer declared that they were formerly Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been, but had ceased to be, some three years earlier, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They insisted, however, that their only fault or error had been that they met regularly on a fixed day before dawn and sang a hymn to Christ as to a god, and pledged themselves by oath, not to some crime. Instead, they vowed not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not be dishonest with others, nor to refuse to return whatever was given for their care when called upon to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97 <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>

When this meeting was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to eat together—but on ordinary, innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Because of what they said, I decided it was even more necessary to find out the truth, by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but wicked, extreme superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hurried to consult you [*by writing this*], for the matter seemed to me important enough to seek your advice, especially because of the number involved. Many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be in danger. The pollution of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be visited regularly, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed. Sacrificial animals are coming from everywhere, when until recently very few purchasers could be found. Therefore it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

***Identify views of Christians about their own religion from data that follow.***

The Christian historian Eusebius quotes a letter from Christians in the city of Lugdunum (now Lyon, France) in 177 CE:<sup>1</sup>

First [*the Christians*] nobly endured the evils which were heaped on them by the public—jeers and blows, dragging, plundering, stoning, and confinement, and everything that an infuriated mob is likely to do to those they consider to be bitter enemies. Eventually they were brought to the forum by the tribune of the soldiers and the magistrates that had charge of the city. There they were examined in presence of the whole multitude; and having confessed [*to being Christians*], they were shut up in prison until the arrival of the governor.

After this, when they were brought before the governor, and when he displayed a spirit of savage hostility to us, Vettius Epagathus, one of the brethren [*Christians*], asked to speak in their defense... When this happened, on-lookers gathered near the governor's seat of judgment cried out against Vettius, for he was an important man of good reputation. The governor, ignoring the reasonable request Vettius made to him, merely asked him if he were a Christian. He confessed in the clearest voice that he was, and he also was arrested, and put in the group of Witnesses [*another name for Christians*] being judged...

(Continued)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/viennalyons.html>

[The next section describes various tortures the Christians then faced, including the following:]

Maturus, therefore, and Sanctus, and Blandina, and Attalus were publicly exposed to the wild beasts—that common spectacle of heathen brutality; for a day was expressly assigned to fights with wild beasts on account of our people. And Maturus and Sanctus again endured every form of torture in the amphitheater, ...again they endured the lashes which were usual there; and they were dragged about by the wild beasts, and suffered every indignity which the insane crowd demanded, in cheers and shouted demands coming from various parts of the amphitheater. And last of all they were placed in the iron chair, on which their bodies were roasted, and they themselves were filled with the fumes of their own flesh.

But the heathens did not stop here, but became still more frantic in their desire to overcome the endurance of the Christians. No matter what was done, they only heard Sanctus confess that he was a Christian, the same as he had said from the beginning...After the Christians stayed alive a long time throughout the great contest, they were at last sacrificed. They had been a spectacle to the world all day long, unlike the usual variety of “contests” that take place in gladiatorial shows.

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Ruins of the place of persecution, the *Amphithéâtre des Trois-Gaules*, in Lyon. The pole in the arena is a memorial to the people killed during this persecution.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution\\_in\\_Lyon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_in_Lyon)

Blandina was hung up fastened to a stake, and exposed, as food to the wild beasts that were let loose against her. Because she looked like a person suspended on something like a cross, and through her earnest prayers, she inspired the combatants with great eagerness: for in the combat they saw, by means of their sister, with their own eyes, Him [*Christ*] who was crucified for them...When none of the wild beasts at that time touched her, she was taken down from the stake and conveyed back to prison. She was thus reserved for another contest.

The earliest writing we have written by a Christian is a letter from the most significant person to expand the new religion's reach beyond Judea, the "apostle" (messenger or delegate) Paul. His first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, was probably written in 51 or 52 CE:<sup>1</sup>

***Based on your data so far, and on the following passages, identify and list differences between the religion of the Romans and Christianity.***

About love for our brotherhood you need no words from me, for you are yourselves taught by God to love one another, and you are in fact practicing this rule of love toward all your fellow Christians throughout Macedonia. Yet we appeal to you, brothers, to do better still. Make it a goal to keep calm, look after your own affairs, and work with your own hands, as we ordered you, so outsiders will respect you, and so you will not suffer poverty.

We don't want you to be ignorant, brothers, about those who sleep in death. You should not grieve like other men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and those who died as Christians will also rise again. God will bring them to life with Jesus.

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You must live in peace among yourselves. We urge you, brothers, to caution those who are careless, encourage the faint-hearted, support the weak, and to be very patient with them all. See to it that no one pays back wrong for wrong, but always aim at doing the best you can for each other and for all men.

Be always joyful; pray continually; give thanks no matter what happens, for this is what Christ wills for you.

Note that Paul, in the passages above, calls the Christians "brothers." This was a pattern among Christians, to refer to each other as "brothers" and "sisters."

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:9-14, 5:13-18

Christians believed that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice (the last one ever needed) that allowed God to forgive their wrongdoing. Based on that belief, here is another pattern Paul described that was followed by Christians when they met together (written about 58 CE):<sup>1</sup>

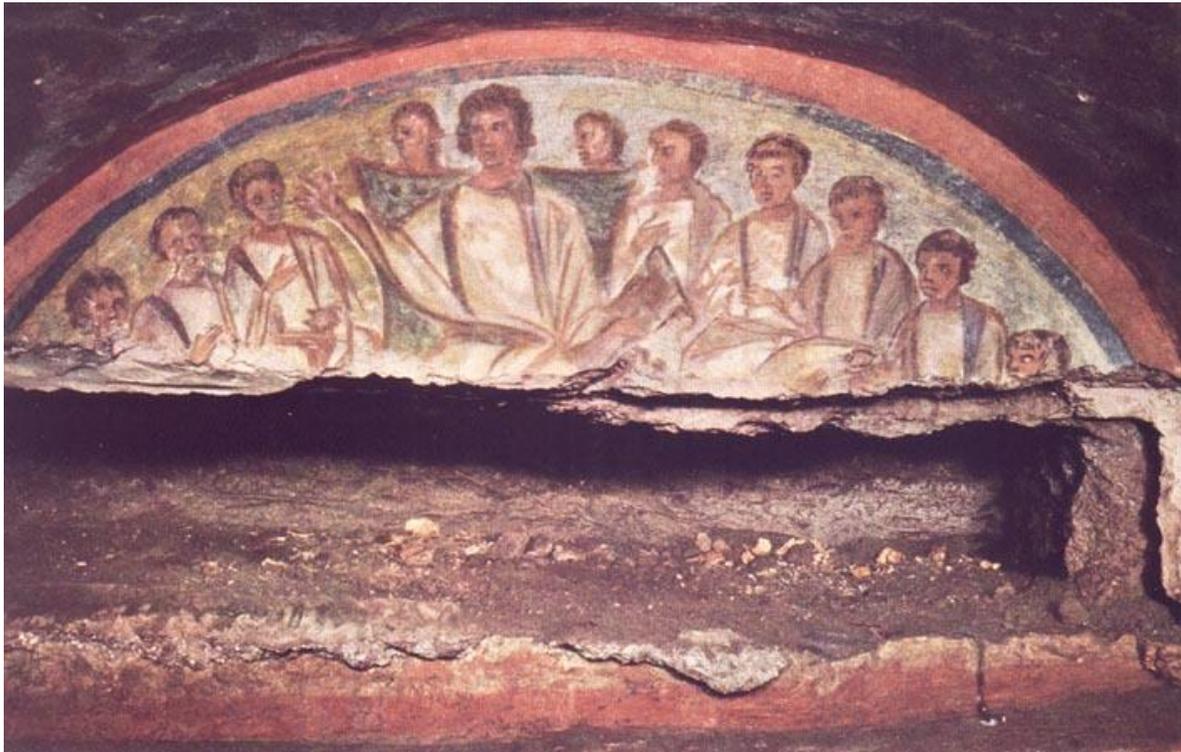
The tradition I passed along to you came from the Lord [*Jesus*] himself: During the evening of his [*later*] arrest, the Lord Jesus took bread. After giving thanks to God, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is given to you. Do this as a memorial to me.”

In the same way, he took the cup [*of wine*] after supper, and said, “This cup is the new bond of promise [*“covenant”*] that links us together, sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial to me.”

For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he returns.

***Enemies of Christians spread rumors that they practiced cannibalism. Explain the relationship between that rumor and the religious pattern described by Paul (above).***

Below: Very early painting of Jesus teaching his followers, from underground catacombs in Rome. The space below the painting was originally a tomb for a Christian.



[https://www.oneonta.edu/faculty/farberas/arth/arth212/early\\_christian\\_art.html](https://www.oneonta.edu/faculty/farberas/arth/arth212/early_christian_art.html)

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Aristides, *Apology*, (to the Emperor Hadrian), about 130 CE:<sup>1</sup>

The Christians, O King, have searched and found the truth. As we learned from their writings, they have come nearer to truth and genuine knowledge than the rest of the nations. For they know and trust in God, the creator of heaven and of earth, in whom and from whom are all things, who has no other god as companion. From God they received commandments which they engraved upon their minds and observe in hope and expectation of the world which is to come... They do not worship idols [*statues*] made in the image of man; and anything they don't want others to do to them, they do not do to others. They do not eat the food which is dedicated to idols, for they are pure. Their oppressors they comfort and make them their friends, and they do good to their enemies... Anyone who has the necessities of life gives to anyone in need, without boasting. When they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a brother; for they do not call them brothers based on birth and family, but brothers because of God's spirit and their shared relationship to God.

Persecution of Christians continued, and was at its worst for several years beginning in 303 CE, under the reign of Emperor Diocletian, who attempted to wipe out Christianity. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of Christian leaders who refused to sacrifice to Roman gods were executed.

However, in 311 and 313, edicts were issued by emperors, ending persecution and gradually giving approval of Christianity. Notable among these tolerant emperors was Constantine, whose mother was a Christian. Besides his support of Christians, and possibly being a Christian himself, Constantine was notable for moving the capital of the troubled Roman Empire to Byzantium, changing the city's name to Constantinople.

In 380, Christianity became the official religion of the empire, though worship of the Roman "pagan" gods continued in many places, dying out very gradually.

***Based on your investigations, what might explain the appeal of Christianity to some people in the Roman Empire? Would Christianity be more likely to be accepted by the wealthy or by the poorer classes? How might the third century problems in the empire (Unit 14) be related to the decline of Roman religion and the rise of Christianity?***

## Follow-Up: Religious Changes in Your Society

Religions are changing around the world—some kinds are growing, some are losing members, and worship patterns are changing within existing religions.

***Interview at least two people over 40 years old, and ask them what changes in religion they've seen over their lifetimes. Write or record their answers.***

***People's perceptions of change are often different from reality. Gather statistical and other accurate evidence (library, Internet, annual almanac books, etc.) about religious change in your society, to compare with the interview results. Prepare a report summarizing what you've found.***

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html> Part 15 (adapted)

### **For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:**

This unit focuses on some profound issues—reasons that humans become religious, and reasons behind major religious change. We recognize, of course, that this is a very sensitive topic, one that can rouse emotions. Beliefs must be respected. We have attempted to present Christianity in a way that will offend neither those inside nor outside any of the myriad versions of that faith being practiced today.

The historical questions are fascinating. Religious historian Karen Armstrong:

“...my study of the history of religion has revealed that human beings are spiritual animals. Indeed, there is a case for arguing that *Homo sapiens* is also *Homo religious*. Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art. This was not simply because they wanted to propitiate powerful forces; these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seem always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world. Like art, religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life, despite the suffering that flesh is heir to.”<sup>1</sup>

The primary questions in this unit are, of course, “What was the nature of Greco-Roman religion?” and “Why and how did Christianity supplant the older religions?”

Armstrong, in the above quote, suggests two or three reasons for religion’s existence. Finding evidence of the first—to propitiate powerful forces—is far easier than for the others. Robin Lane Fox, in his exhaustive (and exhausting) book, *Pagans and Christians*, says:

“From Britain to Syria, pagan cults aimed to honor the gods and avert the misfortunes which might result from the gods’ own anger at their neglect. Like an electric current, the power of the gods had great potential for helping and harming; unlike electricity, it was unpredictable and mortals could do no more than hope to channel its force in advance. Any account of pagan worship which minimizes the gods’ uncertain anger and mortals’ fear of it is an empty account.”<sup>2</sup>

This, of course, is another way of expressing the relationship between stress due to lack of control over the fate of individual, family, city or society, and attempts to reduce stress by seeking control of the forces of fate through religious action. When life or well-being is threatened by famine, illness, forces of nature such as storm or earthquake, childbirth, uncertain travel, or the actions of distant humans in position of power, the human response is to look for supernatural aid. The other, positive side of religion to which Armstrong alluded is less apparent in this unit’s data, but was probably present, to some degree, even in Roman worship and festivals.

**The objective of this unit is to help learners identify systemic relationships between loss or lack of adequate autonomy and religious patterns of action, and the relationships between religious change and other changes within a society.**

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, (New York, Ballantine Books, 1994) p. xix

<sup>2</sup> Robin Lane Fox, op. cit. p. 38

## *Investigation: Reasons for Roman Religion*

The primary sources provide evidence for a series of religious patterns:

- a ritual before planting,
- reacting to omens such as meteors,
- seeking protection from and victory over threatening outside armies,
- consulting oracles such as the Sibylline Books,
- obtaining and worshipping a sculpture of a goddess,
- ritualized dreaming to consult the gods,
- healing rituals,
- deification and worship of emperors
- etc.

Some learners may tend to be too detailed in their pattern descriptions. For example, the first data box—the planting ritual—describes a multistep process, but the details for our purposes are unimportant—a simple description in a few words of the entire process is adequate.

In most cases, the reasons for these patterns are fairly obvious—the desire for a successful harvest, victory in battle, the need for healing, obtaining benefits or avoiding condemnation of a powerful emperor, concern for a safe journey, etc. **Once learners have identified several of these motivations, the organizing question, “How are they alike?” is appropriate.**

The data also suggest positive benefits of holidays and celebrations—occasional relief from toil for workers, meat for the poor, athletic contests and various other spectacles to enjoy, a chance to eat, drink and be merry—a grand time for everybody (perhaps even slaves, to some extent), all in the name of religion.

In the case of individual problems, typically a person would go to a temple, make an offering of some kind—pouring a libation of wine, presenting specially-baked cakes, even sacrificing an animal. The danger, of course, is that the problem wouldn’t be solved. When this happened, polytheism offered a ready explanation—a different god, one who hadn’t been placated, was the cause of trouble.

There are some potential problems in this system. It was built on fear and pessimism, did not look forward to a better future of any kind, and had other limitations. Carroll Quigley explained:

“...Classical ideology regarded the world and the flesh as evil and felt that the spirit could achieve full spirituality only by freeing itself from the body, from the world, and from contact with one’s fellow man and that such spiritual achievement was a consequence of the individual’s own activity alone, without cooperation with his fellow man.”<sup>1</sup>

The primary sources in this unit are inadequate to show all these subtle elements of Roman religion, but some careful questioning of the learners after they’ve analyzed the

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll Quigley, *The Evolution of Civilizations*, second edition, (Indianapolis, Indiana, Liberty Fund, 1979) pp. 336-7

sources should help them get a feeling for the character of Roman religion, particularly the fear that motivated religious actions, and the lack of communal spirit. Comparison with Christianity (next investigation) may help clarify these points.

### *Investigation: Roman Authorities and Christianity*

The *New Testament* book *Acts of the Apostles* makes it clear that the Christians faced opposition, often violent, from the beginning. Apparently the characteristic of Christians that aroused the most opposition from the Romans was their refusal to worship the traditional Roman deities. Opposing the Christians makes sense from a Roman standpoint, because the Romans had a real and continuing dread of the consequences if the traditional gods were to become angry. Christian refusal to honor the ancient gods was likely to bring dire consequence for people everywhere, and the growing number of Christians increased the threat.

Hatred of Christians was also stirred up because of distorted views, perhaps deliberately distorted, of Christian practices. They were accused of cannibalism, because they “ate human flesh and drank human blood” in the ritual of communion (the Eucharist). They were accused of incest, because married couples (with no blood relationship) commonly referred to each other as “brother” and “sister.”

This intense spirit of community, of shared love and fortune that is described both by Paul and Aristides (data boxes) was, probably, the greatest difference between Christianity and traditional Roman Religion.

And the times were changing. Quigley summarizes:

“...Rome itself was getting weaker. Its ideology was losing allegiance everywhere; morale was evaporating; the economic system was declining; the political system was finding it increasingly difficult to get its orders obeyed; the social system was disintegrating...barbarian horsemen were raiding into imperial territory. Ultimately whole barbarian tribes were migrating into the empire itself. The inability of the famous Roman Legion to withstand charging horsemen made Rome indefensible...

“In fact, the crisis was more fundamental than the simple fact of military defense. No one any longer had faith in the Classical ideology or in the Classical gods. A new ideology and a new religion were needed. Though they were already at hand in Christianity, they could not be fitted into the classical culture with which they were fundamentally incompatible.”<sup>1</sup>

Another scholar’s conclusion:

“It [*Christianity*] grew because Christians constituted an intense community, able to generate the “invincible obstinacy” that so offended the younger Pliny<sup>2</sup> but yielded immense religious rewards. And the primary means of its growth was through the

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll Quigley, op. cit. pp.328-9

<sup>2</sup> See page 9, second paragraph of Pliny data.

united and motivated efforts of the growing numbers of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relatives, and neighbors to share the "good news."<sup>1</sup>

An excellent source for additional data on the subject:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>

### *Follow-Up: Religious Changes in Your Society*

We've tried to make this final investigation general enough to apply to any religion in any context. If learners come from religiously diverse backgrounds, encourage them to investigate their own religious community, perhaps teaming with others from the same or similar background. Make sure, of course, that learners treat any views that differ from their own with respect.

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* pp.196-215 (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1996)  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/starksociology.html>