

TITLE:

How and why did Christianity win the Roman Empire?

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1. The nature of the victory

Christianity can be said to have started with the execution, by a Roman judicial decision, of its founder. And yet within three centuries a Roman emperor, Constantine, had given Christianity official sanction that would soon lead to its complete dominance of the empire. Such a reversal, necessitating a complete world-view shift in the culture and achieved without the use of force, is unparalleled in the history of world religion.

I shall examine some of the historical factors which contributed to its success, as well as looking briefly at those which might have hindered it. Nevertheless the expansion of the Church was so dramatic that it is no wonder that Christians attributed it (and still do) to God himself. Even the near-millennial tone of a writer like Eusebius, eulogising Constantine¹, can be easily understood, if not fully endorsed.

The achievement is all the more remarkable in that, for most of this period, the Roman Empire was at the height of its vigour. It was the largest empire the west had seen, and its growth had brought many real benefits to its peoples. Roman culture was not so much imposed upon, but eagerly grasped by, many who saw in it not only personal advancement, but true 'civilisation'. Yet it was conquered by a faith that had its origins in a despised racial cult, and cut right across Roman cultural values.

2. A two-stage process

There were two phases in the early progress of Christianity. The first, until the accession of Constantine in 313, saw the Gospel spread and practised by an often-persecuted minority. Yet by that time an estimated five million, or

ten percent of the empire, were Christians, with provinces such as Asia being as high as fifty percent². Constantine's endorsement of Christianity brought a much greater growth rate, but by common consent also a paradigm shift towards the mediæval fusion of the concepts of 'citizen' and 'Christian'. So by perhaps 500 the whole empire was 'Christian', but in a much less thoroughgoing way³. I will concentrate primarily on the first phase, for the second is more readily explained in terms of the effects of imperial patronage of Christianity and the forcible suppression of paganism. These had a predictable effect on the allegiance, if not the spiritual life, of the masses.

3. *Factors relating to the Empire*

Even by the second century Christians saw God's providence in the timing of Christ's coming:

God [prepared] the nations for his teaching, that they might be under one prince, the king of the Romans, and that it might not, owing to the want of union among the nations, caused by the existence of many kingdoms, be more difficult for the apostles of Jesus to accomplish the task enjoined upon them by their Master, when he said, 'Go and teach all nations.'⁴

The importance of this can hardly be exaggerated. The *Pax Romana*, unheard of only fifty years earlier⁵, made international travel relatively safe, so that there were few political hindrances to evangelism. The road system, built to enforce the peace, also facilitated travel⁶, as did the network of sea trade routes. This can be clearly seen in New Testament itineraries, especially in Paul's mission journeys, whose stages follow the main routes.

The Roman Empire was very much a civic culture, with administration concentrated on cities having close intercommunication. The Gospel, following these cultural links, became early on an urban faith, reaching Rome itself through the migrations of believers even before the apostles came there. It could therefore influence the culture more than a primarily rural movement would have done.

A second major factor was the inheritance by the empire of Greek language and culture. The *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean was the Greek tongue known even by Judæan evangelists⁷, and Jews had long been used to expressing their faith in Hellenistic terms. Jewish intellectuals like Philo had pioneered the adaptation of Greek philosophy to judaistic concepts. This made the development of an intelligible framework for Christian ideas that much easier for the apologists and theologians.

Greek philosophy, especially *via* Plato, had even made ‘a tentative move’⁸ towards monotheism. But Justin Martyr may not have written entirely without foundation when he attributed this part of the *præparatio evangelica* to a third main factor, the exposure of pagans to Jewish ideas⁹. Throughout the Hellenistic period Jews had migrated throughout the Mediterranean area until, it is estimated, seven percent of the Roman Empire was Jewish¹⁰. Jews, many of whom were in influential positions, were the natural recipients of the Gospel, and though many did not believe there were large numbers who did. But in addition to these, and the relatively small number of proselytes, there was a substantial class of Gentile pagans referred to in *Acts* as God-fearers (*φοβομενοι τον θεον*). Recent evidence has shown that these people were

numerous both in association with the synagogues, and in their own organisations, particularly associated with a cult of the Most High God¹¹. So the preparation of the pagan empire for the Hebraic concepts of the Gospel was largely the result of the Diaspora, though vastly more converts were won to the Church than ever were to the Synagogue.

Yet for this to happen there must have been something in the Roman psyche with which Judæo-Christian concepts struck a chord. Indeed there were probably several. Firstly the Roman cult was formal, lifeless and completely politicised, whereas faith in the Hebrew God, based on a covenant-relationship, was vigorous and personal¹². This factor also accounted for the rise of the ‘mystery religions’ in the 2nd century. But unlike them Judaism offered, once the ‘barbarity’ of its Scriptures was overcome, an intellectually coherent theology not far from the best philosophy. It also presented a moral integrity far removed from the more or less value-free mores of paganism, for which in a time of disillusionment many were hungry.

4. Factors relating to the Gospel

Whatever it was in the empire that predisposed to the spread of Christianity, nothing would have happened if Christianity itself had not had an intense vigour of its own, sufficient to supplant the supremacy of the empire in people’s hearts. There were, after all, other movements that did *not* have the same success.

Firstly one must note the irrepressible self-confidence of the movement. Although it had begun with the death of Jesus and only a few hundred Jewish followers, its apostolic teaching predicted that it would

overcome the whole world. Few movements have made such claims, and in those that have it has usually been a sign of imminent failure.

Associated with, and partly arising from, this universal vision was the urgency of its evangelism. From the start, not only leaders like Paul but even ordinary believers ‘gossiped the Gospel’ wherever they went¹³. But even much later Celsus could complain that groups of believers gathered in the marketplace to trick the ignorant¹⁴, and that servants corrupted the young people in their parents’ homes¹⁵. Such commitment inevitably attracted attention, as did the profound moral change in converts. Tertullian records how wives often won over unbelieving husbands by their lives¹⁶, and Justin how it affected those outside¹⁷. Many writers delighted in their opposition to cultural norms, such as abortion and infanticide¹⁸. The contempt for persecution exhibited by so many Christians similarly could not go unremarked, and Tertullian’s famous quotation must have contained much truth:

‘The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.’¹⁹

But to attract attention and respect is one thing – to win converts is another. As *Acts* implies²⁰, people were added more in spite of Christians’ boldness than because of it. One reason given there is the working of miracles by the apostles, and the writings of the apologists show that healing was influential even much later²¹, and even down to the fifth century in a less pure form²². This was not only because it was miraculous, but also because it ministered to the poor, who were unable to afford any other medical aid.

Concern for the poor and humble was intrinsic to the Gospel, and helped account for its popularity amongst the urban poor, particularly slaves, who constituted a large proportion of the early Church. Genuine love in a largely loveless world was, and is, a powerful inducement to belong to Christ, whose own love for sinners was of course its driving force. Their practical help for even the pagan poor was an embarrassment to Julian the apostate²³.

But the essential feature of the Gospel in these early centuries was the core message of salvation from sin through Jesus. Early evangelism dealt squarely with what seem to have been the greatest spiritual concerns of many people, whether the disenfranchised poor, the hardworking freemen or the serious intelligentsia. Death was for all not far away, and for some reason there was a strong sense of moral shortcoming to which paganism had no answer at all.

The Gospel presented a God of complete righteousness who had promised to judge the world imminently. Eternal judgement was a constant theme of evangelism (as it has been until our own, less faithful, times). In this context was a salvation which was offered freely and completely on the basis of the crucifixion – all-too-familiar – of God's own Son. The message was unpalatable but simple, and the life and death issues involved were thoroughly confirmed by the commitment, endurance, self-sacrifice and spiritual power of its adherents. In short, Christianity succeeded because it was seen to be both effective and true.

This may have been less evident as the Gospel became diluted after Constantine's time, but by then it had proved itself over three centuries. We

should not forget that though perhaps a majority later adopted Christianity for convenience, there were still many who grappled with the real necessity for faith, as the struggles of Augustine in his *Confessions* illustrate.

5. *Opposing forces*

There is only space to list a few of the many disincentives to Christianity's spread during the early centuries. Official opposition began in apostolic times, and intensified as the new faith appeared to threaten social order, especially through civil disobedience to the Imperial Cult. This was often instigated or exacerbated by the Synagogues²⁴, which not only anathematised the teachings of the sect, but also saw their own rather precarious privileges threatened.

Judicial persecution was supplemented by a concerted disinformation campaign, which led to the long-lived popular impression that Christians practised infanticide, incest and other obscenities. Their close-knit community life, and their protection of the Eucharist from public gaze, did nothing to dispel this. Nevertheless the accusations were untrue, and eventually lost their force.

Another factor was the proliferation of heretical sects even from the first century. Perhaps this is humanly not surprising – although many would wonder whether only satanic forces could account for the gross distortions to such a simple and unpretentious message. What is more surprising is just how much Catholic unity was maintained despite the lack of any central organisation, even before the final acceptance of the New Testament canon. That Irenæus and Tertullian could appeal to that empire-wide unity at the

beginning of the third century is striking. Only later did heresies pose a serious threat to the Church, producing destructive schisms and necessitating the theological dictates of Nicæa and so on.

One of the most important, but elusive, factors was the profoundly non-Roman worldview enshrined in the Gospel. Jewish thought-forms underlay the whole message. Although Judaism was familiar and attractive to some, it was alien, barbaric and contemptible to most. The apologists' work in re-formulating Christian concepts in terms of Greek philosophy was therefore very necessary. Though we may regret some of what was lost in the process, we should not overlook how largely successful they were in interpreting the fulfilment of God's promise to Israel so that it could be appreciated by Gentiles.

6. *Conclusions*

That Christianity did 'win' the Roman Empire cannot be seriously doubted. Both the empire and Christianity itself changed considerably in the process, in some ways not for the better. However, history has shown that Christianity retains in itself the seeds of its own reformation, whereas the empire has gone irrevocably, as all human empires do.

Many of the factors that influenced this process were historically unusual, even unique, and it may be valid to view this as providential rather than accidental in the light of Jesus' own predictions that it would happen. Whether it could have occurred in any other historical setting would therefore become a meaningless question. Nevertheless it has been shown that, intrinsic to the Gospel itself, there were elements with great power to win people apart

from the Roman setting. This is confirmed by the continued expansion of Christianity to this day into nearly every culture of the world, many of which have not been influenced at all by the Roman Empire. Ultimately it is the Gospel itself, and not its human setting, which is able to save. §§§

(2243 words)

¹ 'Our emperor, emulous of [the universal Saviour's] Divine example, having purged his earthly dominion from every stain of impious error, invites each holy and pious worshipper within his imperial mansions, earnestly desiring to save with all its crew that mighty vessel of which he is the appointed pilot.' Eusebius, *Oration on the Tricennalia of Constantine*, in Stevenson p.392.

² Neill, p.39.

³ With innumerable counter-reactions from monasticism to the Reformation.

⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, II.30.

⁵ Green, p.14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁹ Justin, *Discourse to the Greeks*, XX.

¹⁰ Neill, p.25.

¹¹ Levinskaya, ch.5.

¹² Neill, *loc. cit.*

¹³ *Acts* 8.4.

¹⁴ Origen, *op. cit.*, III.52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.55.

¹⁶ Tertullian, *To his Wife*. II.7.

¹⁷ Justin, *Apology I*, XVI.

¹⁸ E.g. Epistle to Diognetus, V; Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians*, XXXV.

¹⁹ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, L.

²⁰ *Acts* 5.12-14.

²¹ Tertullian, *op. cit.*, XXIII; Origen, *op. cit.*, I.6, VII.4.

²² Augustine, *De Civitatis Dei*, XXII.8-9.

²³ Neill, pp.37-8.

²⁴ E.g. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, XIII.

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