

What was distinctive about Christianity in the Greco-Roman world?

Introduction

On the day before Passover, and by general agreement in 29CE, what to Rome was a petty dissident, was crucified in far flung Jerusalem. This event, under the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate, did not rate any mention in official correspondence and was of consequence only to a handful of people who followed Jesus.

After Pentecost, ideas propagated by Jesus began to disseminate throughout the Empire. There, these ideas met significant opposition, and occasional active persecution, and were exposed to hostile, mature and ensconced religiosities supported by the State. That this mission, caught up in its own understanding and self-expression, was not only able to survive, but by 381CE became the official faith of the State, is nothing short of miraculous.

This essay will explore the elements that distinguished Christianity in the Greco-Roman world. To do this, it will be necessary to consider how Christianity emerged from and distinguished itself from Judaism, thus gaining its own identity. Then several aspects of the Greco Roman milieu that confronted Christianity will be considered, thereby allowing for distinguishing features between the two to be identified, and an assessment of the impact of each upon the other to be made.

Use of Terms

As the terms 'Greco-Roman' and 'Christianity' are the focus of this enquiry, care

should be taken to assign appropriate understanding to each on the context of this essay. The phrase 'Greco-Roman world' carries significant connotations. It can have a variety of meanings including referring to the political world in the late period of antiquity, or to art, technology, philosophy, religion rhetoric, or even religiosity. Indeed, as Hengel puts it, the unqualified use of this term "simply increases the historical confusion"¹ rather than clarifies. In this essay we will focus principally on matters of philosophy and religions when considering the term 'Greco-Roman world'.

The term Christian, first used in Antioch to describe the followers of Jesus of Nazareth (or Nazarenes) also requires elucidation. For the purpose of this essay 'Christianity' will refer to the teachings of the Risen Lord that were conveyed to his followers wherever they may have been, who believed that they lived their lives experientially in Christ, and who identified themselves as his followers.

The Background Matrix

At the time of the emergence of Christianity the world was undergoing the protection of the 'Pax Romana' which continued until approximately 180CE. The Roman Empire allowed for diversity within continuity, hence local variations were possible under the laws governing the Empire. Further, the Latin Romans acknowledged and adopted Hellenistic culture, traditions, and Gods, thus reinforcing the effect of Hellenism which was spread initially by Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE). To the Empire, this continuation of Hellenism promoted stability and certainty. Latin, the language of the Romans, did not subsume, but stood side by side with Greek, with its influence towards the administrative and

military classes. Greek, or dialects thereof, developed into the "lingua franca" of the populace. Further, a system of greatly improved roads allowed for ease of travel and hence a flow of information. Paul for one, appeared to have no doubts that his epistles would reach their destinations at the time when he was writing them in Greek. Nor did he have inordinate difficulty in undertaking four journeys during his lifetime. Thus, ideas and people could move with relative ease throughout the Empire as Christianity was emerging.

Eastern Christianity

Early Christianity, almost from the beginning was subjected to dissention and division as the early Church began to struggle with its understanding of mission. To suggest the early Church was irenic, and "of one heart and one soul"² is both idealized and inaccurate. Early Christianity consisted of a number of diverse groups holding conflicting views with varying degrees of intensity. One group carrying on active mission in Galatia and parts of Greece³ insisted on full obedience Mosaic Law, including circumcision⁴. Another group that identified with Peter and James required converts to observe some purity laws. This group held influence in Jerusalem, Antioch, Pontus, Cappadocia and parts of Asia. A third group, represented by St Paul, did not insist upon circumstances or observance of dietary laws. A fourth group associated with Stephen, Phillip and other Hellenists⁵ demanded a clean break with Judaism. Although this group found strength in Samara, Cyrus and Antioch⁶ and found its voice with the Johanine gospel and the Epistle to the Hebrews, it is historic that the Christian paradigm as expounded by Paul became accepted. However, this did not stop each group from claiming that they had the full pleroma of the Church, thus obfuscating to the

Greco-Roman world just who Christians were and what they believed in.

Concurrently with this struggle for self-expression, at least in the Christian World of Paul, there was a clear focus by Christians on the other world. In assessing the first epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians Wilken concludes that “The eschological expectation was such that Paul believed his generation would live to see the end.”⁷ However, by 80CE when Luke wrote Acts, the emphasis had changed. Luke was, as Cwiekowski puts it “concerned to show that Jesus was not returning soon and the Church was being called to take its place and carry on its mission in the world of the Roman Empire.”⁸

The Christian Appropriation of History

Whatever the perception that Christians had of themselves, it is clear that once Christianity had determined that it would be a part of this world then there arose a need to state its beliefs within history, and what better history than to assume and adopt the history of the Jews.

Christians, who were becoming increasingly gentile, thus formed the view that the Jews had abrogated their past by failing to see that Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Hence Christians understood themselves to be “the wild olive shoot” grafted to the roots of the true faith replacing branches were broken off because of unbelief.⁹ The Jews, not unnaturally, were quite insistent that this sect of Nazarenes be driven out of Judaism.¹⁰ Thus by the end of the first century the Christians were excluded from the Jewish communities and forbidden to enter the synagogues. The twelfth benediction in Synagogue prayer had, by then, acquired the wording: “May the Nazarenes (Jewish Christians) and the Minim

(Jewish heretics) die in a moment, may they be blotted out in the book of life and not be enrolled with the righteous.”¹¹ Clearly between Judaism and Christianity there was no fraternal affection. Indeed, Judaism had by the end of the second century broken all contact with Christianity to the point of rejecting the Septuagint as Hellenized and replacing it with Aquila’s translation of the Old Testament which better reflected their faith.

The Threat of Christianity to the Greco-Roman World

Thus, Christianity was cast adrift in the Greco-Roman World. That world, according to Wilken, began to see Christianity as a “tiny, peculiar, antisocial, irreligious sect drawing its adherents from the lower strata of society.”¹² Indeed, best estimates suggest that there were considerably fewer than 10,000 Christians in 100CE, about 200,000 in 200CE principally disbursed among several hundred towns,¹³ or point three percent of the population. Hence, it is appropriate to ask just what was the threat that was perceived by the Roman Empire from Christianity?

Christianity, unlike Judaism, who had withdrawn into itself, saw its prime purpose as a mission which emphasizes brotherly love, equality and forgiveness which challenged the social fabric of the Roman World. After all, Paul himself had pleaded for Onesimus, a slave whom he saw as a beloved brother.¹⁴ To have slaves the same status as Romans undermined society. Further, Christians refused to pay homage to the Gods and Emperor, hence making them suspect of sedition to the State. It is little wonder that the Roman Empire based on military power saw Christians as a threat which was fortuitously not perceived as a

constant, serious, or present threat to the Empire. Hence, although Christianity was from the time of Nero “a capital crime, always liable to the severest penalty, even when law was not enforced,”¹⁵ Christianity clearly survived and flourished despite the occasional attempts by the Roman State to quell the faith.

How the Greco-Roman World saw Christians

Roman sources of the time are interesting in that they show the perception of the Romans towards the Christians. For instance, the Legate Pliny the younger (62 – 115CE) wrote to Emperor Trajan (Emperor 98 – 117CE) seeking his advice in dealing with Christians which he described as depraved, immodest, superstitious, and a contagion to society. Further, Romans had heard of ‘love meals’, the drinking of blood as well as the holding of secret rituals. Thus, accusations of cannibalism and indiscriminate sexual intercourse were made by the uninformed about the followers of, what was to them, a mystery cult. Minicius Felix, a third century apologist attributed to Cornelius Fronto (100 – 160CE) the information as to how a young baby was beaten to death and eaten before the gathering degenerated into a sexual orgy “all equally being guilty of incest, some by deed but everyone by complicity.”¹⁶

Of course, Christians aided these views by their reluctance to admit the unbaptized, the *pleroma* of true faith. However, some Christian writers drew attention upon themselves. For instance, Eusebius of Caesarea claimed that a Christian group, the Phibionites, practiced gross abuse including eating unborn children, promiscuous intercourse, and using semen and menstrual blood as part of the anamnesis to Christ. Given that Christian writers could refer to such

behavior as being practiced by some libertine groups, it is then little wonder that to the non-Christians, all Christians were guilty of such practices. In matters of religion, “the Romans were very conservative, suspicious of innovations and mistrustful of new religious ideas and practices”¹⁷. Further, for religions to be accepted, it required the approval of the Senate, and Christians never subjected themselves to such approval, hence their perception of this new cult was a scandal to them.

The General Characteristics of Religions of the Greco-Roman World

A number of characteristics can be discerned about the religious beliefs of the Greco-Roman World. The principle one of these was that the religious environment was non-exclusive. Thus, being a follower of one cult did not preclude the acknowledgement of others. Further through syncretism, there was a cross pollination of ideas from foreign cults influencing the domestic cults without subsuming them. Thus, although the Greek Gods could not control fate, they did, after their adoption by Rome, begin to exert power over fate. Linked to that was the emerging notion that the future could be divined, hence astrology, magic, formulae for healing and private divination were used as adjuncts to control the future.

As the religiosity of the Greco Romans developed people began to personify and venerate virtues such as tyche, victor or peace. Associated with this was the notion that every aspect of daily life was under the patronage of a particular deity, hence employment, sporting, and social clubs developed which were linked to a particular deity and cultus. Further, a tendency to see hierarchy in the Gods was

emerging thus admitting lesser Gods such as daemons or genii to mediate on behalf of Individuals and the greater Gods. Overarching these religiosities were cults associated with emperors. As the imperial cult never made any exclusive claims, it did not form a competitor to the Gods of the Greco-Roman World. Indeed, Klauck refers to the cult of the Emperor as an “institutional metaphor”¹⁸ as it channeled loyalty and gave the Empire a stable orientation. Pliny in an epistle to Trajan states that as a test for Christianity he would order people accused of being Christians to invoke the Gods and offer wine and incense to the image of the Emperor and denounce Christ. This test was seen as giving a concrete sign of loyalty to the State which was the duty of all good subjects. To fail meant the Christians condemned themselves.

Greco-Roman Philosophy and Christianity

The Romans adopted and assumed Greek philosophy with the cross-current of ideas of Aristotle, Plato, Epictetus, Epicurus, Zeno and others being real and impacting upon and influencing the moral intellectual and ethical milieu of the time.

Christianity, however, that proclaimed Christ Crucified, was seen as foolishness by the Greeks. As instance, Christians believed that all things that were made into being are wholly dependent on God who created from non-being, voluntarily and out of love. The Greek system of thought relied on order from pre-existing matter for its world view. Thus Plato, for example accepted a divine being which formed, ruled and ordered everything for the best. Further the Christian view that God was wholly transcendent and immanent who intervened in world history was

totally incomprehensible. The Platonic and Pythagorean view was that the world was ruled by clear concepts of forms and ideas and that the world was constantly changing was unintelligible, especially as Christians had an eschatological and teleological notion of history which was impossible for them to grasp.

The Christians real concern related to what happened after death, hence this life was for the receipt of Grace and imitating the life of Christ. Their cosmology was different to the Greeks who in the case of the stoics believed everything was reabsorbed into the divine, or the Aristotelians and Epicureans who were interested only in the here and now, or in the case of Platonists who regarded the resurrection of the body as ridiculous.

Further, although the pagan world had different and diverse views on the nature of knowledge and understanding, Christianity had no such problem. It could pick what seemed best to express itself. Therefore, Hellenic philosophical concepts were appropriated to describe the new faith to the Greek mind as well as being utilized by converts to Christianity to explain or defend Christianity to the Greco-Roman world. Of course, not all Christian writers had time for the Greeks. As Tertullian put it, "what has Athens to do with Jerusalem? On the other hand, Justin saw the teaching of Greeks as belonging to the Christians. Clement saw Hellenism as a gift of God that provided a propaedeutic for Christianity. Thus Christianity ascribed new content to Greek notions and worlds to express itself. This only served to further confound the Greco-Roman World.

How Christians Saw Themselves

Although Christians participated in the world, they saw themselves as being both

in yet not of this world. They saw their response to the world determined by the mandate of Christ that "he who loves his life will lose it and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."²⁰ Hence martyrdom for one's faith was not to be avoided. Indeed, Clement of Alexandria called martyrdom perfection as the martyr exhibits the perfect work of love. Christians had as examples the Saints martyred for their love of Christ which spurred them on to win the victors crown for themselves.

The relationship of Christians to the world is, as the author of the Epistle to Diognetus states "that of a soul to the body."²¹ They were intolerant of other religions and eschewed military service or civil office which required worship to an Emperor. Thus, for their faith, they were prepared to put up with the notion that they were bad citizens who did not advance the needs of the State. That is not to say that Christians who fell away, or apostasised were always dealt with compassionately by themselves. The renunciation of faith in the face of death was a reality and led to dissention amongst Christians culminating in the crisis of the Church over donatism and meletianism after the persecution of Diocletian which ended in 305 CE.

Conclusion

It is patent that Christianity survived the alien and hostile environment of the Greco-Roman World. Although Judaism and Christianity lay claim to the same religious heritage, Judaism unlike Christianity was no threat to Rome. Christians were seen as a danger to the State. However, their small numbers did not represent a perceived challenge to the State and although the Church was illegal,

it attracted occasional active persecution. However, what overthrew Rome was the power in the beliefs of the Christians which were able to transform and convert the lives they touched.

Although pagan writers, such as Celsus, saw the principle source of Christian strength as being their close-knit structure and coherence as a social group, they clearly failed to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit. Chadwich, on the other hand, claims that “the practical application of charity was probably the most patent single cause of Christian success.”²² This again misses the impact of faith on the believer. Christians were prepared to die for Christ and thus earn for themselves a martyr’s reward. This zeal ultimately triumphed against the ensconced power structure. The human choice of martyrdom in the face of oppression of their beliefs appears to be a genuine and valid human response which continues to be relevant today.²³ That is not to say that all Christians chose martyrdom to apostasy, and indeed how the Church was to view Christians found wanting in the face of their apostasy led to the Donatist and Meletian controversies in the Church in the early fourth century.

The success of Christianity lay in the fact that it directly met the human need for true life. Early Christianity, despite the divergence and variety of varying views, did manage across the entire empire to preserve the idea of unity and orthodoxy. This is because unlike the Greco-Roman world that had a plethora of faith systems as well as diverse philosophical views, Christianity was centered around one person, Christ who was crucified in real time in Jerusalem under the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate and whose ideas were given to the Church in truth and power by the Holy Spirit.

The Greco-Roman world however did in its turn influence Christianity. Just as

Christianity took on Hellenic philosophical concepts it found itself becoming influenced by the very concepts that it was using to express itself to the pagans. Bouyer has remarked that in relation to Justin Martyr that "We should see in his work not so much a Hellenization of Christianity as the Christianizing of Hellenism."²⁴ This view neatly encapsulates the inter-relationship and interpenetration of one on the other. Hence the Greco-Roman world can say that although her pagan gods may have been overcome, Christianity by contact has assumed and adopted her philosophical ideas. Further, by causing Christianity to defend and articulate its faith in the face of a pagan world, Christianity began to define itself and develop a clear vision of itself.

Hence, from the perspective of the pagan world, for Christianity to emerge as the State religion under Imperial protection and patronage was miraculous good fortune. To the Christians, however, this outcome only represented the divine working through the Holy Spirit for the salvation of humanity as part of God's plan to his greater Glory. That victory was achieved, was positive affirmation to the Christians of the power of Christ.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Martin Hengel, *The Hellenisation of Judea in the First Century after Christ*. (SCM Press, London, 1989), 54.
- ² Acts 4:32
- ³ Phil 3:2-6
- ⁴ Acts 11:2, Gal 2:15
- ⁵ Acts 6:5
- ⁶ Acts 11:19-20
- ⁷ W.R.L Wilken. *The Myth of Christian Beginnings*. (Anchor Books, New York. 1972).
- ⁸ Frederick J Cwiekoski. *The Beginnings of the Church*. (Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1988), 73.
- ⁹ Rom 11:16-32
- ¹⁰ Acts 25:5
- ¹¹ Edward Lohse. *The New Testament Environment*. (Translated John E Steely. Xpress Reprints, London, 1994) 163.
- ¹² Robert L Wilken. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985) 14.
- ¹³ Keith Hopkins. *A World full of Gods: Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire*. (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1999) 84.
- ¹⁴ Philemon 1:16-17
- ¹⁵ Gregory, Dix. *The Shape of the Liturgy*. (A & C Black, London, 1960) 145.
- ¹⁶ Robert L Wilken. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985) 19.

¹⁷ Robert L Wilken. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985) 62.

¹⁸ Hans-Josef Klauck. *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*. (T & T Clark, London, 2003) 327.

¹⁹ 1 Cor 1:22

²⁰ Jn 12:25

²¹ Jacques Zeiller. *Christian Beginnings*. (Translated P J Hepburne-Scott. Hawthorn Books, New York, 1960) 61.

²² Henry, Chadwick. *The Early Church*. (Penguin Books, London, 1976) 56.

²³ One only has to reflect on the self-immolation during the Vietnam war and the Islamic suicide bomber to determine the accuracy of that observation.

²⁴ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. (McGraw-Hill, New York, Vol. 3, 1967).

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