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GLOBAL
CHRISTIANITY
AND ISLAM

EXPLORING
HISTORY, POLITICS,
AND BELIEFS



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THE FIRST FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY



CHRISTIANITY WAS BORN in the multicultural context of the Greco-Roman world of the first century and was the dominant religion in what is today the Middle East, North Africa, and southern Europe during the first seven centuries. Even with the geographical dominance of Islam over two-thirds of the Christian world of the seventh century, Christians under Islamic rule continued to hold majority status until the twelfth century around the Mediterranean basin.

EARLY SPREAD

The spread of the Christian faith into the ancient world surrounding the Mediterranean occurred simultaneously in multiple areas and not only in Europe. Along with the early disciples of Christ, many Christian leaders and merchants spread the new faith to various urban centers across the Roman Empire. By the close of the first century, Christianity became a noticeable religion that attracted the educated and elites as well as the poor and marginalized, incorporating the various strata of the Roman society in church communities. Early Christianity was transcultural, embracing various cultural identities within its fellowship. Contrary to the common belief at the time that higher moral life was something attained only by philosophers and those who allowed reasoning to shape their minds, early Christians proved

to the world that all people could attain such high moral standards. Christians were able to communicate the message of the gospel effectively to a multitude of cultural and religious groups not through coercive means but through their living faith and sacrificial lifestyle, winning them the respect of others in a world of great cultural and religious diversity.

Several other factors contributed to the spread of Christianity during the early centuries before Islam, trade and persecution among them. Christian merchants from Syriac, Armenian, and Coptic backgrounds played a significant role in spreading the gospel to Africa, India, and central Asia. As early as the third century, the Syriac church (Iran and Iraq) sent missionaries to India. There is a reference to Christians living in Bactria (Afghanistan) around the year 200. An eighth-century Syriac text known as *The Chronicle of the Seer* gives a glimpse of the connection between the Syriac and Indian churches in the last half of the third century.¹ Reports from fifth-century Syriac church synods list churches for several cities along the Silk Road. Many of these major cities are located in modern Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.

By the third century, Christianity was well rooted in Egypt, not only in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria but as far as Nag Hammadi, about five hundred miles to the south. Christians in Egypt counted for the largest Christian community in the Roman Empire during the third and fourth centuries, with an estimated Christian population of 16 percent.² Missionaries were sent from Egypt to eastern Libya, Nubia, the Sudan, Ethiopia, Yemen, India, and Persia. During the fourth and fifth centuries, the missionary outreach of the Copts reached to Gaul (France) and Britain.³ The Monastery of St. Maurice, an Egyptian Roman official, near modern Geneva is a reminder of these early missionary activities by the Egyptian church.⁴

By the end of the fourth century, the population of the city of Antioch (one of the early cities associated with Christianity; see Acts 13) was about half a million, and half of the inhabitants were Christian. The gospel

¹G. A. Williamson, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965).

²Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 13.

³It must be noted that Christianity reached Gaul (France) in the late first and early second century.

⁴Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 177. St. Maurice was part of a Roman legion serving in Switzerland. The legion included a medical team where people such as St. Verena from Upper Egypt were sent to attend to the health needs of the Swiss and educate them on new methods of hygiene.

spread from Asia Minor (Turkey) to Armenia in the north. After sporadic times of persecution, the king of Armenia became a Christian, the first king to accept Christianity, and in turn Armenia became the first Christian nation two decades before Constantine, the first Roman emperor, decriminalized Christianity in the Roman Empire in 313.⁵

By the close of the fourth century, Christianity reached most of southern Europe, major parts of the Middle East and North Africa, Nubia, and Ethiopia as well as India. During the early centuries of Christianity, the Christian faith spread in a sophisticated multicultural world of various religions and cultures by introducing a gospel of peace and reconciliation that engaged the minds and hearts of people, not through waging wars on these communities and forcing them to accept the faith. The spread of Christianity during this time occurred despite or even because of severe persecution that claimed hundreds of thousands of Christian lives across the Roman Empire.

Early Christianity is credited with articulating and defending the Christian faith by formulating various statements of faith or creeds. The renowned schools of thought that flourished in major urban areas such as Alexandria, Egypt, Antioch, Asia Minor, and Carthage, Tunisia, played an instrumental role in educating Christian leaders while producing major theological work on the basics of the Christian faith that are still in use by the global church today. The remarkable spiritual movement of monasticism that originated in Upper Egypt has influenced Christian spirituality all through the history of Christianity. The movement was instrumental in spreading the Christian faith across Europe and other parts of the world, while monasteries played an instrumental role in preserving biblical texts and manuscripts.

TRANSFORMING A POWERFUL EMPIRE

Christianity transformed Greco-Roman culture in a remarkably short period of time. It started and flourished in urban centers and from there moved to influence the countryside. It is estimated that by the end of the first century there were churches in fifty urban cities in the Roman Empire, most of them in Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and southern Europe, primarily Greece and Italy. By the third century, Christianity witnessed

⁵Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 113. It must be noted that Constantine merely decriminalized Christianity in 313, marking the “era of peace with the church.” However, Emperor Flavius Theodosius I (379–393) was the first Roman emperor to declare Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire.

significant increase in North Africa, Ethiopia, Spain, Gaul (France), and Germany. It is estimated that Christians formed more than 10 percent of the total population of the empire by the end of the third century.⁶

The remarkable increase in the number of Christians even before Christianity was made the official religion of the state is indicative of the noteworthy transformation that took place in the Roman Empire as a whole. The exemplary lifestyle of the early Christians won them the respect of the larger Roman society. While they lived like strangers and sojourners, they were faithful citizens who abided by the law and even rose above the obligations of the law. Closely related to the values the gospel affirmed was the moral character Christians demonstrated in their daily lives. It was the extraordinary exemplary life of Christians that attracted others to the faith. Christians set up schools and hospitals to educate and treat people while attending to the needs of the community at large, not only Christians. They extended unconditional love to those who hated them and harassed them. Their sacrificial lives and witness to the faith they had in Christ presented a new hope for the people around them. They were able to transform the social strata of the community, where rich and poor, masters and slaves, men and women were all part of the new community.

The transformation of society did not occur through coercive laws of the new religion, and they did not use armies to conquer territories and bring them under the banner of Christianity; such a practice is foreign to the model of the kingdom that Jesus exhibits through his life, teaching, and sacrificial death on the cross. The kingdom of God that Jesus preached is about forgiveness and healed relationships. Christian influence on society during the first three centuries was quite remarkable considering the powerful political structure of the Roman Empire, with its massive pagan worship and its mechanism of enforcing harsh laws.

INSTITUTIONALIZED CHRISTIANITY

The conversion of Constantine to Christianity ushered in a new era in the life and ministry of the church. After enduring persecution for three centuries, Christians were finally given the freedom to practice their faith without the fear of being tortured. By the first decade of the fourth century, Roman

⁶Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 7.

emperors put an end to the persecution of Christians. Christianity became the official religion of the empire in 392, ushering in the era of Byzantine Christendom, a form of institutionalized Christianity. (The Christendom model in Europe started in the eighth century and lasted in the West for over a thousand years.) Constantinople, named after the emperor, was built on the site of the small city of Byzantium and was dedicated as the capital of the Christian world in 330. The new capital reflected the magnificent power of the new empire replacing Rome, which was associated with the political and religious systems of the old Roman Empire. From the fourth to the eighth century, Christianity was primarily associated with the eastern side of the empire, not with Rome. Constantinople was the first Christian metropolitan capital city and continued to occupy this role until the end of the first millennium, when it was replaced by Rome. Byzantium, however, continued to be the most significant metropolitan city until its fall to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

The institutionalization of Christianity in the fourth century had significant ramifications for the sociocultural development of Christianity. Christianity became the official religion of the state. Imperial coins bore the name of Christ, and the imperial army incorporated Christian symbols on their shields. The state built churches and magnificent cathedrals. Public buildings and monuments were decorated with Christian symbols. As persecution of Christians subsided, the lifestyle of Christians was not any different from the rest of the Roman citizens. Gone were the days when Christians were known for their dedicated and sacrificial Christian life; they just lived and behaved like everybody else. As Stephen Neill writes, “Faith became superficial, and was identified with the acceptance of dogmatic teachings rather than with a radical change of inner being.”⁷

The impact of the emperor’s toleration of Christianity was far-reaching. As Christianity became the privileged faith, clergy were supported by the government and were exempt from imperial taxes. This brought with it a new form of imperial domination. The emperor’s approval became necessary for episcopal appointments in major sees. Bishops who were recipients of imperial funds were dragged into supporting or blessing political decisions and were asked to advise the emperor in matters of war and politics beyond their initial callings.⁸

⁷Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1986), 41.

⁸For more details on the role of Constantine in Christianizing the Roman Empire, see Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

One issue usually associated with Constantine's endorsement of the Christian faith is whether such a move was a help or a hindrance to the life and ministry of the church. One might initially think that with Constantine's conversion and the empire's full acceptance of the faith, finally Christians were able to worship freely and flourish. However, a deeper look at the context of such political change discloses a completely different picture. According to studies done by Rodney Stark, Robert Wilken, Roger S. Bagnall, and others, the number of Christians in the Roman Empire increased drastically in spite of persecution (or perhaps because of persecution) during the second half of the third century.⁹ Stark argues that by the year 300 the number of Christians was over 10 percent of the total population, or more than six million out of the estimated population of sixty million. This significant increase from only 2 percent fifty years earlier (the year 250) made it impossible for the Roman authorities to continue their policy of persecuting Christians. It became clear to authorities that persecuting Christians during the rule of Emperor Diocletian in 303 and his successor, Emperor Galerius, in 305 had failed to force Christians to support state polices and religious practices. As a result, by 311 Emperor Galerius switched tactics, exempting Christians from worshipping the Roman gods provided that they prayed to their own God for the safety and protection of the Roman Empire.¹⁰

In light of this background, Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan two years later was not out of the ordinary. Rather, it was simply a continuation of a new state policy of embracing a prevailing movement rather than wasting time and energy fighting it. Because of the exemplary lifestyle of Christians and their faithful support of the well-being of all citizens in the Roman Empire, it was imperative for the state to embrace the Christian God as one among others in the pantheon of gods worshiped across the empire. While Constantine's move to establish Christianity as the official religion of the state contributed significantly to the well-being of Christians and the

⁹Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), and Stark, *Rise of Christianity*. Both writers present compelling arguments on the significant increase in the number of Christians during the third century of Christianity. Bagnall presents similarly astonishing findings about the number of Christians in Egypt during the third and fourth centuries. He argues that in the year 280 Egypt's population was 13.5 percent Christian, while in the Roman Empire Christians were at 5.4 percent; he also argues that in 315, the number of Christians in Egypt increased to 18 percent, while in the Roman Empire as a whole it increased to 17.4 percent. See Roger S. Bagnall, "Religious Conversion and Onomastic Change in Early Byzantine Egypt," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 19 (1982): 105-24.

¹⁰Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 3-13.

organizational structure of the church, the reality was that by the end of the third century Christianity had already become a very powerful force within the Roman Empire, one that necessitated such a move. The resilient presence of Christians required a different treatment from the state, which came in the form of official recognition of the Christian faith as a state religion.

BYZANTINE CHRISTENDOM: SETTING THE STAGE FOR ISLAMIC ADVANCEMENT

Understanding the Byzantine model of Christendom explains the religious and political context at the time when Islam appeared in the seventh century and why the Muslim armies were able to sack significant parts of the Byzantine Empire with relative ease. It also points to several issues regarding the impact of this new arrangement on the life of the church and Christians during that period.

When Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century, the relationship between the church and the state entered a new phase. Under this new arrangement, the state not only supported the church but also interfered in its business. Constantine's top priority was to keep the empire powerful and united, and one of his main concerns was the unity of the Christian churches. If the Christian faith was to serve as the unifying religion of the empire, Christianity had to be a unified system, whichever teaching it might hold.¹¹ Thus, while the issue of church unity was not new in the time of Constantine, decisions on theological matters were perceived as crucial for the unity of the church and ultimately for the unity of the empire. Accordingly, the emperor invited church leaders to settle their differences and to defend the Christian beliefs against heresies. During the fourth and fifth centuries, several ecumenical councils were held to discuss a host of theological issues. The nature and person of Christ were at the center of these theological debates. Through these ecumenical councils, the church was able to express its belief in and understanding of Christ, the Trinity, and other major doctrines. The outcomes of ecumenical councils were usually expressed in a statement of faith or creed. The first and probably the most well-known of such statements of faith is the Nicene Creed of 325.

¹¹See Maureen A. Tilley, trans., *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996); also W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952).

Before Constantine, the only means bishops had to enforce church discipline was excommunicating the other party. With imperial power interfering in church decisions, church discipline could be carried out by force. Imperial troops took responsibility for suppressing any movement that would have disturbed the peace of the empire. Those who opposed the Nicene Creed were sent into exile. Church leaders of North Africa known as Donatists were also arrested and sent into exile.¹² Imperial involvement in church affairs resulted in intensified divisions and hatred among church leaders and Christian communities. Christians who disagreed with the majority decision were finding themselves for the first time being persecuted by the Christian state that was supposed to protect them.

The imperial hope for unity among Christians was never achieved. To the contrary, divisions between leading theological schools intensified, and bishops started competing over prestigious seats. By the fifth century, the leading theological schools, in Alexandria and Antioch, produced different theological stances on the relationship between the divinity and the humanity of Christ, prompting the imperial court to call for another ecumenical council to settle the disputes. The Council of Chalcedon (the fourth ecumenical council) met in 451 with the hope of resolving these theological differences.¹³ The outcomes of the council were rejected by the Egyptian, Armenian, and some Syrian churches, resulting in the first major division in the church. Meanwhile, using Greek to formulate statements of faith was completely foreign to the Latin-speaking Christians of North Africa and southern Europe. Accordingly, the church in the Latin world (Rome and North Africa) was not enthusiastically involved in the early ecumenical councils.

¹²The North African church was one of the largest Christian communities in the Roman Empire, with over seven hundred bishoprics at the beginning of the fourth century. The Donatists were concerned about allowing Christian leaders who previously denied the faith during the time of persecution to participate in any leadership role. They regarded any sacraments practiced by traitors of the faith to be invalid. Other leaders argued against such strict roles and were willing to forgive the traitors if they repented. Several councils were held to resolve the issue. The councils ruled against the Donatists, a decision that was backed by imperial power. The conflict between these two parties resulted in two churches in North Africa, Catholics and Donatists, with each having its own senior bishop. The Donatist controversy dragged on for another three centuries and was only resolved by the near disappearance of the church in North Africa centuries later under Islamic rule. It must be stated that the disappearance of the North African church started before the coming of Islam and was also due to the various attacks by the Vandals during the sixth century, which resulted in the destruction of Rome as well as several major urban centers in North Africa, forcing many Christians to flee to Spain and southern Italy.

¹³The second ecumenical council was held in Constantinople in 381, while the third ecumenical council was held in Ephesus in 431.

POWER STRUGGLES

The interference of the imperial court in the church's life resulted in power struggles among the leading churches. While Antioch and Alexandria were known for their outstanding theological schools, prominent theologians, and endless theological debates, Constantinople and Rome represented political power and authority. By the beginning of the fifth century, political tensions between Constantinople and Rome were obvious. Rome could no longer boast a prominent imperial presence, a status that had drastically shifted to Constantinople, but it was the city that gave the empire its previous glory and prestige. By the mid-fifth century, several church decrees, backed by imperial approval, indicated that the bishop of Rome occupied a place of special authority within the churches of the empire. Similar statements came out of the Council of Chalcedon, establishing the authority of the bishop of Constantinople over the rest on the eastern side of the empire. The impact of such political moves proved to be detrimental to the overall relationship between churches in the region, keeping in mind that neither Rome nor Constantinople had produced any significant theological work at the time.¹⁴

The Christian state of Byzantium was supposed to protect the Christians and the clergy, but to the contrary, those who opposed the state were persecuted, harassed, and sent into exile. While many Christians saw this new arrangement as a great victory for the church and for the cause of Christ, others were deeply concerned about the interference of the state in ecclesiastical issues. Christians in Egypt, Syria, North Africa, and parts of southern Europe suffered persecution and were harassed by the Byzantine Empire; for them, the church-state partnership simply represented another form of imperial oppression, one masked in Christian garb. The Byzantine model of Christendom was a mixture of blessing and disaster for the church. On one hand, it supported Christians and helped the church to survive, but on the other, it was responsible for intensifying church divisions and weakening the church's unity, creating major factions among Christians. By the seventh century, Christians were fighting Christians and even persecuting other Christians with the support of the state. The Byzantine model of Christendom had dire consequences for the church. When Muslim armies

¹⁴Harold Allen Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

marched into Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and North Africa in the seventh century, they were able to sack these nations with relative ease because the church was weak and divided. These majority-Christian nations at the time were weary of three centuries of constant conflict and persecution inflicted by Byzantium. Meanwhile, decades of fighting between the Byzantine and Persian empires exhausted their abilities to defend themselves, and major territories under their domain were easily sacked by the Muslim armies before the close of the seventh century.

CONCLUSION

Worldwide Christianity today is indeed in debt to its eastern roots around the Mediterranean. Early Christians lived a remarkable lifestyle that was shocking to the surrounding pagan culture, and their unconditional love and service won them the respect of the larger community. The early Christians were able to transform the highly sophisticated Roman Empire not by force but by preaching a gospel of peace and reconciliation while exhibiting a lifestyle that truly reflected the ethos of the gospel. The spread of the Christian faith during this era occurred through winning the hearts and minds of people, not through wars and invasions. From its inception, Christianity was characterized by significant aspiration for education, demonstrated in the early Christian schools of thought, accompanied by a desire for strong spirituality, expressed in the monastic movement. The early Christians who endured inconceivable persecution were able to keep the unity of the church community and to protect its integrity.

By the fourth century, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, ushering in the era of Byzantium Christianity. Christian ethos and religious beliefs dominated the cultural and social life around the Mediterranean. The conversion of the Roman imperial order brought dramatic changes in Christianity. Imperial interference in ecclesiastical matters to keep the unity of the church while maintaining a unified empire politically resulted in significant divisions and hostilities among Christians and church leaders across the region. By the time Islam appeared in the seventh century, Christians were fighting Christians, and their divisions resulted in the sacking of their territories by Muslim armies with relative ease.

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