

Christianity in Context: The Evolution of a Religion

***The “Church” from
Nero to Constantine***

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**Nero (born 37 A.D.; reigned 54-68 A.D.;
committed suicide; clinical “madman”)**



Christianity made illegal

Great Fire of Rome



Nero's Law – 64 A.D.



Persecutions

Sporadic but Severe

Refused to make sacrifices and worship the Roman gods – unpatriotic: Impression that ‘We don’t support the troops’

Refused to take oaths of loyalty to Emperor Nero and participate in the Emperor worship cult – treasonous: Christians are seen as ‘Benedict Arnolds’

Cannibalistic (eat flesh and drink blood) and immoral (Love Feasts)

Tertullian (160-220 A.D.)

The Apology

“They [the persecutors] think that Christians are the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber River rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up, if the heavens give no rain, if there’s an earthquake, if there’s a famine or pestilence, straightaway the cry is, ‘Away with the Christians to the lion!’”



“Around” 100 A.D., split between Judaism and Jesus Movement (now called “Christians”)

- **Christianity now a separate and new religion (no longer a Jewish sect; Jewish Synod of Jamnia in 85 A.D. excommunicated Christians as “apostates” — *aposunagogos*—literally ‘cast out from the synagogue’)**
- **But Christianity is not a “monolith”—there are actually many “Christianities” floating around the Empire (no one knows what will become “mainstream”— orthodox—and what will be judged “heretical”)**

Pliny the Younger (61-113 A.D.)—Roman pagan, a Senator, who wrote to Emperor Trajan and devised the “litmus paper” test to determine who was a Christian—the willingness or unwillingness to make sacrifices to the gods



Tacitus (56-120 A.D.) -- Roman pagan who wrote the *Annals*, which described the persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero



Celsus— Roman pagan who wrote *True Discourse* (in 178 A.D.)
Library of Celsus at Ephesus

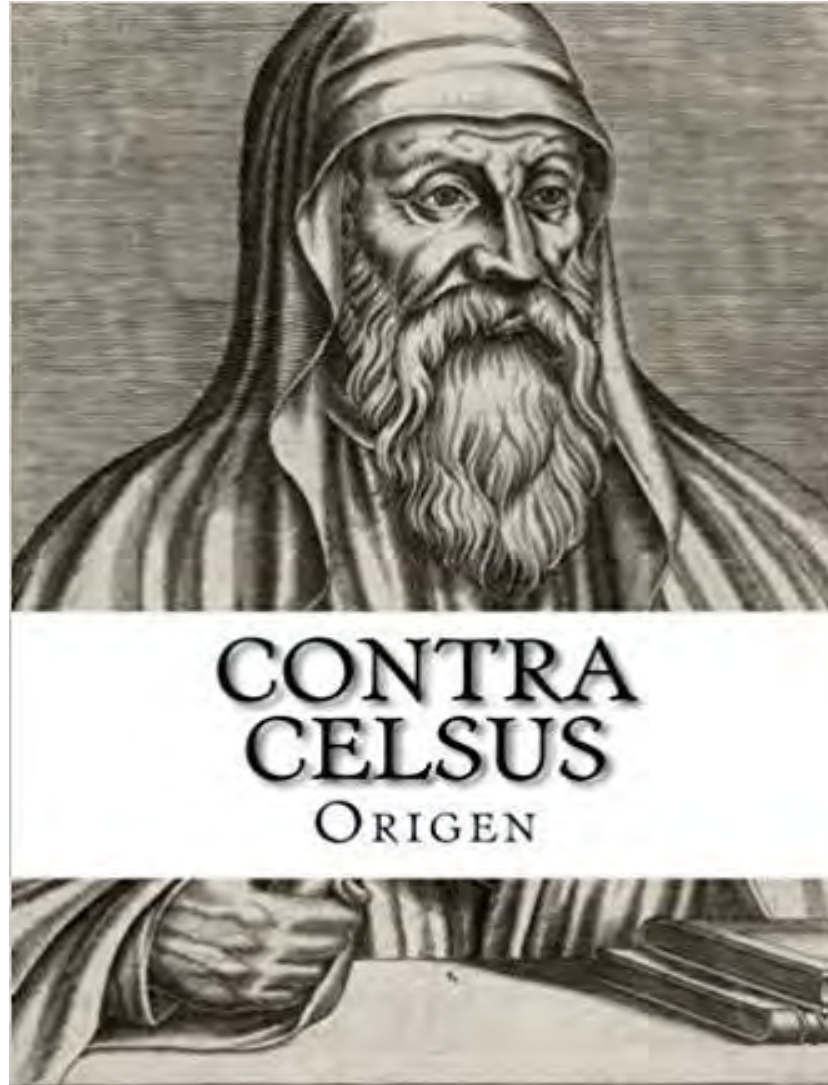


Celsus attacked Christianity on “historical grounds”—Jesus was the illegitimate son of a carpenter whose wife had an affair with a Roman soldier named Panthera; Jesus a magician (a typical insult to other religions), a trade he learned in Egypt to which the Holy Family had fled; disciples=fishermen and tax collectors (uneducated and undesirables); Jesus’ hysterical women disciples fabricated the empty tomb story; Christianity a “young” religion, and therefore suspect (ancient traditions like Judaism much more highly respected).



Live in rooms full of light. Avoid heavy food. Be moderate in the drinking of wine. Take massage, baths, exercise, and gymnastics. Fight insomnia with gentle rocking or the sound of running water. Change surroundings and take long journeys. Strictly avoid frightening ideas. Indulge in cheerful conversation and amusements. Listen to music.

Origen of Alexandria (185-254 A.D.)—Christian “apologist” who defended Christianity against its pagan critics. He argued that his faith was compatible with the dominant philosophies of the time, especially Platonism



Mystery Religion Cults

Other than Judaism and Christianity, the Mystery Religions were the most influential religions in the early centuries after Christ. The reason these cults were called “Mystery Religions” is that they involved secret ceremonies known only to those initiated into the cult. The major benefit of these practices was thought to be some kind of personal salvation.

The Mystery Religions were not, of course, the only manifestations of the religious spirit in the Roman Empire. Public cults could be found which did not require an initiation ceremony into secret beliefs and practices. Greek polytheistic religion (the gods of Mt. Olympus) and its Roman counterpart (Zeus=Jupiter; Ares=Mars; Athena=Minerva, etc.) are examples of this type of religion.

Each region of the Roman Empire produced its own Mystery Religion. Out of Greece came the cults of Demeter and Dionysus, as well as the Eleusinian and Orphic mystery religions, which developed later. Asia Minor gave birth to the cult of Cybele, the Great Mother, and her beloved, a shepherd named Attis. The cult of Isis and Osiris (later changed to Serapis) originated in Egypt, while Syria and Palestine saw the rise of the cult of Adonis. Finally, Persia (Iran) was a leading early locale for the cult of Mithras, which held a special appeal to Roman soldiers due to its frequent use of the imagery of war.

Valentinus of Rome (100-160 A.D.)



Heresy/Controversy of belief in the second century A.D./C.E.—an issue from “within”

The priest Valentinus and the “Gnostics” emphasized the divine/extraordinary, “other” dimension—“nature”—of Christ: *Gnosticism* (sometimes also called “*Doceticism*”) believed that Jesus only *appeared* to be human, for God didn’t really assume flesh (there’s no “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” in John 1:14!), the Word only “seemed” to do this. As a result, Jesus didn’t really face actual temptation in the desert, Jesus didn’t die on the cross, he was not raised from the dead, etc. Here Jesus’ divinity is emphasized at the expense of his humanity. The Apostles Creed was a response—correction—to this----

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried:
He descended into hell;
The third day he rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the
dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;
The holy catholic Church;
The communion of saints;
The forgiveness of sins;
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting.
Amen.

Diocletian (ruled 284-305)



Diocletian



The Four Edicts 303-304 A.D.

The course of these events is recorded by Eusebius in his *Church History* (c.323-324) and *Martyrs of Palestine* (after 311), and by Lactantius in his *Deaths of the Persecutors* (c. 316-321).

First Edict

In the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian, in the month Dystrus, called March by the Romans, when the feast of the Savior's passion was near at hand, royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches be leveled to the ground and the Scriptures be destroyed by fire, and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded, and that the household servants, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity, be deprived of freedom. (*Church History* 8.2.4)

Next day an edict was published, depriving the Christians of all honors and dignities; ordaining also that, without any distinction of rank or degree, they should be subjected to tortures, and that every suit at law should be received against them; while, on the other hand, they were debarred from being plaintiffs in questions of wrong, adultery, or theft; and, finally, that they should neither be capable of freedom, nor have right of suffrage. (*Deaths of the Persecutors* 13)

Second Edict

Not long after... a royal edict directed that the rulers of the churches everywhere should be thrown into prison and bonds. (*Church History* 8.6.8)

Third Edict

Other decrees followed the first, directing that those in prison if they would sacrifice should be permitted to depart in freedom, but that those who refused should be harassed with many tortures. (*Church History* 8.6.10)

Fourth Edict

In the course of the second year [304], the persecution against us increased greatly. And at that time Urbanus being governor of the province, imperial edicts were first issued to him, commanding by a general decree that all the people should sacrifice at once in the different cities, and offer libations to the idols. (*Martyrs of Palestine* 3)

[the penalty for not doing so, was death]

The Persecutions under Diocletian





Constantine the Great (ruled 306-337 A.D.)



Constantine I (The Great)

Christian sources record that Constantine experienced a dramatic event at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, after which Constantine claimed the emperorship in the West. According to these sources, Constantine looked up to the sun before the battle and saw a cross of light above it, and with it the Greek words "*EN TOYTΩ NIKΑ*" ("By this, conquer!", often rendered in the Latin "*in hoc signo vinces*"); Constantine commanded his troops to mark their shields with a Christian symbol (the *Chi-Ro*), and thereafter they were victorious. It was October 28th, 312 A.D.

After his victory, Constantine supported the Church financially, built various basilicas, granted privileges (e.g., exemption from certain taxes) to clergy, promoted Christians to high-ranking offices, and returned property confiscated during the reign of Diocletian. In 313, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan reaffirming the tolerance of Christians—the persecutions stopped, and Christianity was recognized as a legal religion.

Constantine I (The Great)

Under the influence of Constantine, the Christian movement gradually underwent its major transformation from a previously underground and even criminal movement into an officially sanctioned religion of “first rank” within the Roman Empire. Constantine chose to take a lead role in much of this transformation. For example, in 325 A.D. he summoned the Council of Nicea, effectively the first Ecumenical Council of the Church.

Constantine began to utilize Christian symbols early in his reign but still encouraged traditional Roman religious practices including sun worship. Between 324 and 330 A.D., Constantine built a new imperial capital at Byzantium on the Bosphorus (it came to be named for him: *Constantinople*) – the city employed overtly Christian architecture, contained churches within the city walls (unlike “old” Rome), and had no pagan temples. In 330 A.D. he established Constantinople as the new capital of the Roman Empire. The city would gradually come to be seen as the center of the Christian world. Today Constantinople is known as “Istanbul.”

The Council of Nicea – 325 A.D.



Ancient Nicea = contemporary Iznik, Turkey



Arius of Alexandria (250-336 A.D.)



Heresy/Controversy of belief in the fourth century A.D./C.E.—another issue from “within”

Arianism was an influential belief that denied the divinity of Christ: The priest Arius maintained that Jesus as the Son of God was created by the Father and therefore was neither co-eternal with the Father, nor “consubstantial” to him (literally “with the same substance” — ‘of the same substance as God’). Thus, the humanity of Jesus was affirmed by Arianism, but at the expense of his full divinity.

Results of the Council

- **Doctrine of the Trinity**
- **Nicene Creed**
- **Formation of Bible – biblical books first listed in 367 A.D. in an Easter sermon by Bishop Athanasius; then by 500 A.D. there was the Bible we recognize today**

The Trinity

The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity holds that God is one God, but three co-eternal consubstantial persons or *hypostases*—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—as “one God in three Divine Persons”. The three Persons are distinct, yet are one “substance, essence or nature”. The Latin word for “persons” is *personae* and your instructor would translate and interpret this as . . .

“Masks”

Roman Theatre at Beit She'an



The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.

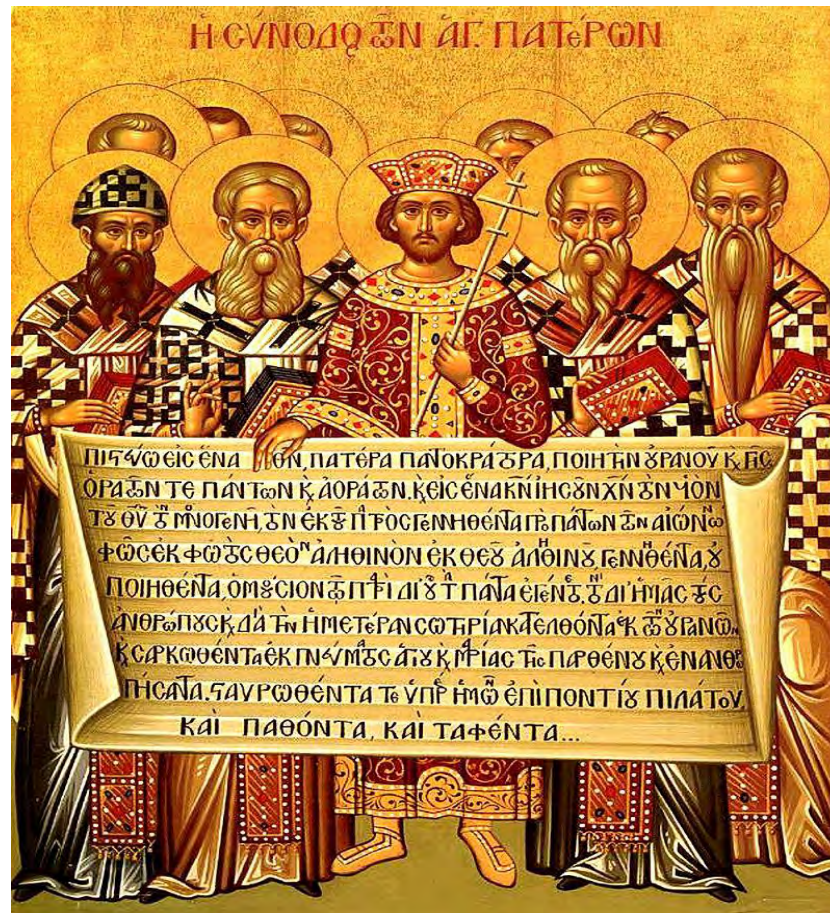
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son].
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.

The Nicene Creed—Constantine and the Bishops of the First Council of Nicea



The Church Fathers



The Church Fathers—the “first ‘Fathers’ of the Church” were not Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli!

The list includes such notables as **Ignatius** (d. 110 A.D.), **Polycarp** (d. 155 A.D.), **Justin Martyr** (d. 165 A.D.), **Irenaeus** (d. 202 A.D.), **Clement of Alexandria** (d. 215 A.D.), **Tertullian** (d. 220 A.D.), **Origen** (d. 254 A.D.), **Cyprian** (d. 258 A.D.), **Athanasius** (d. 373 A.D.), **Basil** (d. 379 A.D.), **Cyril of Jerusalem** (d. 386 A.D.), **Ambrose** (d. 397 A.D.), **John Chrysostom** (d. 407 A.D.), **Jerome** (d. 420 A.D.), **Augustine** (d. 430 A.D.), **Cyril of Alexandria** (d. 444 A.D.).

Summary

The Jesus Movement began as a sect on the periphery of Judaism. There were hundreds of other groups—among them, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots.

Paul was chiefly responsible for the growth of the Movement (the Way) because he appealed to the Gentiles for conversion.

With increased numbers and with Christians' refusals to do the "proper patriotic things," persecutions began—"bookends" Emperor Nero and Emperor Diocletian.

Constantine legalized the Christian religion and subsequently made Christianity the official state religion.

The Council of Nicea established the doctrine of the Trinity, formulated the Nicene creed, and provided impetus for the formation of the official scripture canon of the Church—the Bible.

Church Fathers (*Apologists*) provided a "reasonable defense" of the Christian faith to pagans and guidance to Christians for their beliefs and their practices.

There is but ONE "Church" with Christian centers scattered throughout the Empire.