

# An eternal legacy – christianity in world history up to the 16th century

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Human history, seen in ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, Byzantine and countless others, is a treasure trove of inventions, innovations and ideologies. The Roman Empire, the largest, most influential and most powerful civilization of the ancient world produced many legacies that have changed our modern society forever. It is not surprising then, that out of the greatest empire of the ancient world rose the greatest legacy of the ancient world; Christianity.

The indelible mark left by the creation and development of the Christian religion makes it the most significant legacy of the Ancient World. There are countless reasons as to why Christianity's dominance as a legacy is unchallengeable. Firstly, the rich and detailed stories that make up the history of the Christian religion are unparalleled. The spread of Christianity to all four corners of the world was a transfer of ideas and theology that had never been seen before.

Finally, and probably most importantly, Christianity's endurance, through the rise and fall of empires, wars, plagues, and technological evolutions, to today is what defines it as the most important legacy of the ancient world. The origins of Christianity, from the early stories of the Old Testament to the life of Jesus Christ reach far back in history. Christianity was initially based on Judaism. The beliefs of Judaism were simple: one God ruled over all life, which was the first monotheistic religion in the world. Jewish dogma, which is a code of beliefs, was written in the Torah, a holy book, and the laws of God, the 10 Commandments. 1

Thou shall not covet thy neighbour's house; thou shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is thy neighbour's. " 2 Christianity is also based on the life of Jesus and his teachings from 30 to 70 CE. 3 This time was the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of the initial development of the ideals of Christianity. The story of Jesus' life is an intricate one, filled with journeys, revelations and proclaiming the word of God, in what was called the gospel.

Jesus' teachings were revolutionary, in that he challenged the established religious authorities to repent from their self-righteousness and hypocrisy. 4 Through his teachings, Jesus proclaimed that the prophecies foretold in the Torah were coming true. Because of his lessons of kindness, compassion, forgiveness and faith, Jesus' followers believed him to be the Son of God, and therefore the saviour of humanity. This bold statement, however, did not go unnoticed. The leaders of the Jewish religious hierarchy, the Sadducees, believed that no man could hold such a powerful position in the eyes of God.

The Roman officials saw Jesus, often called the Messiah who would free the Jews from Roman tyranny, as a threat to their security. This combination of fear from both parties created a conflict around Jesus himself. Ultimately Jesus was arrested and crucified, under Pontius Pilate the Roman Prefect and Procurator, even though there was little proof against him. 5 Clearly, the importance of Jesus Christ's life in the history of Christianity, and the importance of Jesus as a historical figure as well, contribute to the legacy of Christianity.

An important stepping stone in the history of Christianity is the relentless persecution that Christians faced throughout much of the time of the Roman Empire. From the first century CE until 312CE when Christianity became the accepted as a religion in Rome, in the Edict of Milan issued by Constantine, Christians were persecuted by Roman society. 6 The Christian belief of every man's equality in the eyes of God was in direct contradiction of the traditional hierarchy known and revered by Roman people and leaders especially.

Roman officials were alarmed at the fact that this new belief could upset the whole order of society. Because of this, Christians were used as scapegoats for the myriad of problems the Empire encountered. For example, in 64 CE an enormous fire ravaged the city of Rome which the Emperor at the time, Nero, claimed the Christians had started. Nero rounded up all the Christians in the city, and they were hideously tortured and executed in a grand public spectacle. Some were crucified, others were thrown to wild animals, and still others were burned alive as living torches. 7 The madness did not end here.

As Christians who were bound by the 10 Commandments, worshipping the emperor or the Roman Gods was against what Christianity stood for, but this offence was against Roman law. In addition to this, the Christian rituals seemed savage and cannibalistic to many Romans. The sacrament of drinking wine as Christ's blood, and eating bread as His body, as well as other apparent strange religious practices were upsetting to them. Romans believed these new rituals angered the Gods and when Rome was

pummelled by famines and floods, they saw this as punishment for the Christians' wrongdoings.

Persecution continued through the second and third centuries in the form of pogroms, which were organized, unofficial encouraged massacres or persecution of a minority group. 8 Persecution reached its apex under the emperor Diocletian. Diocletian was under severe stresses during his rule, mainly because of economic difficulties and invasion threats. As most Emperors, he regarded himself as a god-like figure, and took it personally when the Christians continually refused to worship him.

However, unlike emperors before him, Diocletian organized official persecutions on the Christians. In spite of all these trials and tribulations, the breadth of Christianity grew steadily throughout this time. Christian church leadership strengthened and solidified both the church government and its influence throughout the Empire. Local Christian groups were at first led by a Council of Elders, but were eventually ruled by bishops known as the Episcopus. 10 The Christian population increased to as much as one tenth the population of Rome by the end of the third century. 11 In summation, the history of persecution in Roman times contributes to the dramatic and rich history of the Christian religion.

The early spread of Christianity from 30 CE to 325 CE, when it became the official religion of the Roman Empire at the Council of Nicea, was remarkable. 12 Christianity took flight in the Roman Empire for numerous reasons. Many people were unsatisfied with their current polytheistic, pagan religion which involved worshipping gods such as Jupiter, Diana, and Venus, who were

sometimes cruel, ruthless, and selfish. 13 Christianity promised a God who loved all people no matter what their circumstances. Before Christianity, a God needed to be pleased and pampered by the religious traditions that centred on them.

A common practice was sacrificing the best bull to a God in return for a blessing. 14 Christianity offered blessings at no cost, and for the countless peasants that littered the streets of the Roman Empire, this was essential. Christianity was also one of the first religions that offered the hope of an eternal afterlife. Heaven, a place of everlasting bliss, a life awaiting you after death: it was a concept that delighted and amazed the new Christians. The religion of Christianity fostered a sense of belonging. It created a community that accepted any and all people. This was encouraged by its extremely well organized leadership.

Martyrs were another source of inspiration for new Christians. A martyr, or one who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce religious principles showed the people that to believe so passionately in a cause was right and that the Christian cause was worth all the devotion they had. 15 Along similar lines, the zeal of a missionary life which consisted of spreading the word of God was appealing to many people who found they had no cause to fight for. In a more general conclusion, Christianity gave many people an important life focus that they were otherwise lacking, but had been searching for.

These, among other reasons, instigated the initial spread of Christianity, and contribute to its importance as a legacy. The global spread of Christianity

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began in Roman times and still continues today. Roman communications networks enabled Christianity to spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire and eventually to the rest of Europe, and finally the entire globe. As time progressed, Christianity divided into three major branches. 17 The Roman Catholic branch of Christianity is the successor of the church established in Rome soon after Christ's death. It traces its spiritual history to the early disciples of Jesus.

The Pope, or spiritual leader, traces his office's lineage back to St. Peter, the first Pope, one of Jesus' disciples. Roman Catholicism was originally predominately practiced in Ireland, Poland, France and Spain. During the fourth century, the Roman Catholic Church split and the Eastern Orthodox branch was formed. The split was primarily a political one due to the division of the Roman Empire into western and eastern components. The two churches became officially separate in 1054. Orthodox churches are largely national, each associated with a particular country.

Orthodoxy is common in Russia, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, the Ukraine, and Armenia. The Protestant branch split from Roman Catholicism during the Reformation, a sixteenth and seventeenth century series of church reforms in doctrine and practice. This movement challenged the authority of the Pope, and became popular in Scandinavia, England, and the Netherlands. Protestantism eventually divided into many denominations which arose in response to disputes over doctrine, theology, or religious practice. 18 Some of the large denominations today are Lutherans, Methodists and Baptists.