

# The influence of philosophy in the roman empire

[History](#), [Empires](#)



### (1) Philosophers as Teachers and Preachers

The functions of a philosopher, under the Empire, were strangely unlike all that the name suggests, or chiefly suggests, to us. The philosopher spoke to the public, who gathered in schools which were sometimes, though not always, open without fee. There he did the office of a modern preacher. According to Epictetus a school of philosophy was the consulting room of a physician. Men came to the philosopher with maladies of the soul. It was an abuse to look for fine speeches and sounding phrases, for the real object was to depart cured, or on the way to cure. Philosophers also acted as wandering preachers who went from place to place, and called men from the storm of passion to purity and inward peace.

They were the advisers of statesmen; the best of the Emperors, Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, the Antonines, were surrounded by philosophers. They were the confessors and directors of the great. Canius Julius went to execution accompanied by his philosopher : Rubellius Plautus and Thræsea in their last moments were sustained by the philosophers who were their spiritual guides. The philosopher, moreover, figured as a kind of family chaplain, and waited upon some lady of wealth who affected philosophy, because it was in vogue. Such a position, of course, must often have exposed him to a degradation which he had brought upon himself.

### (2) Their Practical Aims

How was it that philosophy came to play such strange parts ? The answer is that philosophy had changed its character and aims. It was no longer a speculative system which strove to account for things by examining ultimate

causes. Such was the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Such was not the philosophy of Zeno or Epicurus. Greek speculation died out after the death of Greek freedom. Zeno and Epicurus asked how is a man to order his life.? What must he do or not do that he may live well." The one put the end of life in virtue, the other in pleasure. But the spirit of each was practical, not speculative. Even the counsel given by the one, resembled that given by the other. Seek freedom from passion, said Zeno. Seek freedom from mental disturbance, said Epicurus.

### (3) Stoicism

#### (a) Its earlier form in Greece

We may dismiss Epicureanism, which had no permanent influence in the Empire, and look more closely at Stoicism. Zeno, who has been just mentioned, was the founder of the school. He taught at Athens about 300 b. c in the Stoa Poikile, or frescoed arcade, from which his disciples took their name. His teaching was developed by Chrysippus, who was esteemed the second founder of the school, and who died an old man in 206 B. C. It is remarkable that no eminent Stoic was Greek by blood. Zeno and Chrysippus were both Orientals, and lacked that capacity for speculative thought which was proper to the Greeks.

Their philosophy was a materialistic Pantheism, borrowed chiefly from Heraclitus; their ethics were taken from the Cynics. All knowledge, they held, came from sense : only matter had real existence. God was the soul of the world, in substance an ethereal fire permeating all, directing all for the

common good, but doing so in accordance with inexorable fate which took no thought of the individual as such. God was all in all, for from this ethereal fire which they called God, all things had proceeded : it was continually reducing everything to itself.

At last came the general conflagration and the cycles of being began over again, for matter was eternal and could change its form only, not its substance. The reason in man, his guiding principle, was part of the world-soul, i. e. of God. Man had one duty, to live according to nature. But what is nature? It is the reason of the world, the reason which is in each man, the common reason expressed in the moral sentiments of mankind. This virtue or compliance with nature is the only good, while vice is the only evil. Thus the wise man quells his passions and despises alike the pleasure and pain, which are the motives of the uneducated.

(b) How modified when transplanted to Rome

This philosophy was transplanted to Rome long before the Christian era. But it flourished chiefly under the Empire, when Seneca, Musonius, Epictetus, M. Aurelius, gave it its greatest names. On Roman soil Stoicism underwent remarkable modifications. The value of the earlier Stoicism lay in its moral earnestness. Yet it had its physics, and above all it cultivated logic with minute and wearisome pedantry. The Roman Stoics frankly declared the small interest they took in any questions, save questions of duty.

'What does it profit,' asks Seneca, ' to know which line is straight, ' If you don't know what is the straight course in life?' These enquiries make us

learned, not good: wisdom 'is a more obvious, aye a simpler thing.' Again, Seneca, for all his declamation on the self-sufficiency of the sage, painfully felt that this ideal condition of mind was never realised. His Stoicism too contained elements borrowed from different philosophies. Under the Empire philosophies mingled, as religions mingled—and Seneca, in this more like a Platonist than a Stoic, looks on the body as the prison of the soul, and in his view of human sinfulness and 'the flesh ' his utterances often tally in the most astonishing way with those of St. Paul.

The later Stoics did not abandon the materialist Pantheism of their founders—and when Seneca acknowledges the need of divine help, his language is probably much more Christian than his thought. To him the reason of man was part of the universal reason which sustained the universe. Thus, if on the one hand, the sage humbled himself before God, on the other he felt that he was the equal of deity: nay, in one way he was according to Seneca its superior, because he attained virtue by his own effort. Again, though the later Stoics use language which sounds like Monotheism, they did not dream of discarding the popular mythology., except where it was immoral.

Their system left room for many deities, each of which embodied a portion of the divine spirit. The Stoic did not look upon death as the end of all. The soul still survived and continued its personal life; only, however, till the impending conflagration of the world, when its individuality would be absorbed into that of the universal spirit. For the rest, deliverance from the body was a gain, not a loss, in the eyes of the later Stoics. 'It is but the image of your son which 'has perished,' so Seneca writes to a bereaved

parent, ' he himself is eternal,' (here he goes beyond rigid Stoicism) 'and is in a better condition.'

### (c) Its Humanity

But the true beauty of Stoicism, and especially of the later Stoicism, was its humanity. The upright mind, says Seneca, is nothing else than God dwelling in a mortal body, and such a mind may be found alike in a Roman Knight, in a freedman, in a slave. ' Slave', says Epictetus to the cruel slave-owner, 'wilt thou not bear with thine own brother? Wilt thou not 'remember who thou art and over whom thou hast power, that they are thy kinsfolk, thy brethren by nature, the descendants of Zeus.?' When scourged the perfect sage will love his tormentors, knowing that he is the 'father and brother of all.'^ These fine sayings on the brotherhood of man are something better than declamatory phrases, though allowance must be made for the rhetorical spirit of the age.

The gentle disposition of M. Aurelius was deeply affected by the feeling of human brotherhood. Here are a few of his maxims. 'I cannot find it in my heart to be angry with one 'of my own nature or family,' [i. e. with any man) 'for we are all made for mutual help, as the feet, the hands, 'the eyelids.' 'A man that has done a kindness never 'proclaims it, but does another as soon as he can, like the vine which bears again the next season.' 'The best way of revenge is not to imitate the injury.' 'Mankind are under one common law, and, if so, they must be fellow-citizens.' Stoic principles, too, had a great influence on public weal. The Roman lawyers eagerly adopted the Stoic idea of a universal State, and gave it expression in the Roman code.

Despite its theories of equality, however, Stoicism did not rise to the thought of a world without slaves: it was not till centuries were gone that Christian imagination took so bold a flight. But under Hadrian and the Antonines slaves were for the first time placed under the protection of the law. Their owners lost the power of life and death; they could no longer kill their slaves unchallenged; the subterraneous dungeons were abolished, and in case of intolerable hardship a slave could obtain his freedom, or at least secure transference to a better master. It is, moreover, to the credit of Stoicism that Seneca is the one Roman writer who expressed disapproval of those gladiatorial shows which Roman ladies witnessed without shame.

#### (4) Platonism, as represented by Plutarch

Stoicism in this modified form was for long the chief, though not the only philosophy. The four great philosophies, viz : the Platonic, the Aristotelian, the Stoic, and the Epicurean, were all represented in the chairs which the Antonines founded and endowed at Athens. Of these the Aristotelians and Epicureans need not detain our attention, but of the Platonists something must be said. Their best representative was the famous and voluminous writer Plutarch of Chaeronea, in Boeotia, who died 120 a. d. A Platonist in the true sense he was not. A Platonist was impossible during an age so poor in speculative thought.

His interest was occupied by morality and religion, and though he borrowed from any philosophy suited to his purpose, his best inspirations were caught from the Platonic philosophy. He developed the Platonic idea of the divine unity: he inherited the Platonic dualism which tended to place the origin of

evil in matter, and he found the way to religious contentment in rising to union with God by a moral and ascetic life. His Monotheism, however, allowed him to recognise a vast multitude of gods and demons who were the secondary objects of religious worship. He himself officiated as a heathen priest.

#### (5) Neo-Platonism

More than a hundred years after Plutarch's death Platonism entered on another phase and attained a most remarkable degree of popularity. In this new form it is known as Neoplatonism. Ammonius Saccas who died in 245 is generally regarded as the founder of the School. His most famous scholar Plotinus was born in Egypt in the year 205 came to Rome in 244 and found numerous disciples there, among whom were the Emperor Gallienus and his wife. He died in 270; his writings were arranged by his distinguished pupil Porphyry, and in that form still survive. Neoplatonism has really little claim to the name of a philosophy. Yet it arose from the same want which philosophy professes to satisfy; it endeavoured to supply a basis of certainty.

The old beliefs had been shaken by scepticism. Amidst the variety of opinion and usage prevalent in the Empire, how could one be sure of anything? The Stoics had answered much as the Scotch philosophy answered the scepticism of Berkeley and Hume. They appealed to the 'common conceptions' of mankind. This was casting out scepticism by scepticism, for acquiescence in untested opinion is the negation of philosophy. No Plato or Aristotle arose to solve the problem. But the Neoplatonists, despairing of philosophy, took refuge in religion, or rather in revelation.



They believed that traces of divine inspiration were to be found among all nations. But the more ancient a worship was, or professed to be, the richer, as the Neoplatonists thought, was its treasure of divine wisdom. They were specially attracted by the ancient worships of the east. But to them every form of polytheism, when an allegorical method of interpretation had refined the grossness of its mythology, was holy and venerable. Their philosophy tended more and more to become not philosophy, but a theosophy.

Revelation was the basis of certainty.

The philosopher had also to pursue personal holiness. The ethics of the Neoplatonists were borrowed from the Stoics. Besides this the strictest asceticism was enjoined : abstinence from flesh and wine, and a single life, were means of perfection. The philosopher was to withdraw himself from the multiplicity of things to the unity of reason. This, however, was not enough. God is above reason, beyond all thought. The highest bliss was reached, when thought ceased, and the philosopher in ecstatic vision was united to the cause of all being and all good. Plotinus, during the six years that Porphyry spent with him, was rapt into ecstasy four times.

Summary:

To sum up. The age which preceded and accompanied the growth of Christianity was an age in which men, ideas, things, were mingled together. The partition walls between nation and nation were pulled down, and the belief in the unity of mankind was strong. The spirit of genuine speculation was dead : the literary splendour of Greece and Rome was fading away, and sense and taste alike were spoiled by garish rhetoric. But on the other hand,

we find philosophers of many schools contributing to form an ideal of virtuous life.

We find an increased spirit of humanity, which shows itself in the improved condition of slaves, in institutions for destitute children, in benevolent confraternities. We find an intermingling of all religions, and, partly as a result of this, a general tendency to Monotheism : so that men retain the belief in many gods, but regard them more and more as manifestations of one divine spirit. Finally, we see in Neoplatonism an attempt to merge philosophy in religion, and particular religions in one universal religion.