

Christianity in medieval western civilization history essay



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The rise of Christianity changed classical Western Civilization to medieval Western Civilization by absorbing the traditions and cultures of Rome, Greece, and the Hellenistic states and uniting Europe under the new religion. It would serve as the basis for the development of Western Civilization after the fall of Rome, giving rise to a new empire with the church at its head. The Christian Church held centralized religious power, in contrast to religion's role in Greek and Roman society, where the state and its citizens ruled.

The rise of Christianity changed classical Western Civilization to medieval Western Civilization by absorbing the traditions and cultures of Rome, Greece, and the Hellenistic states and uniting Europe under the new religion. During the Roman Empire, there was tremendous inequality. The majority of the population lived in poverty, while only a very small portion of the population held immense wealth. Rome had a very strict social hierarchical system. At the pinnacle was the Emperor, above all in power and divinity. Next was the aristocracy who ran the city and controlled the wealth. Below them were merchants, often wealthy but not aristocratic. Then came the artisans who made the goods, but were heavily taxed. The lowest class of residents were those who performed the menial tasks, followed by peasant farmers and slaves. Free grain was often distributed to these lower classes in cities to prevent uprisings (Stockman, Christianity in the Classical World).

In the early days of the Empire, Rome was polytheistic. Worship of many religions was tolerated, so long as none threatened the peace of the Empire. However, over time, people began to desire a more spiritual experience than what the state religion offered (Guissepi). They looked to the mystery religions to fulfill this need. Mithraism was one such cult. It was a belief in <https://assignbuster.com/christianity-in-medieval-western-civilization-history-essay/>

the story of the son of the Sun God who also came to earth to rescue mankind. Mithraists believed that Mithra came to earth in a human form in order to experience human suffering and to atone for this suffering. Mithra had followers with which he shared a last supper before he was executed and rose from the dead (Hooker). When Christianity came around, people found it somewhat familiar. The appeal was greatly enhanced however, in that the “ Son” was a human being, not a myth. It fulfilled the human need to belong, instead of living in isolation (PBS / WGBH Educational Foundation). Christians helped each other. A major focus of the faith was the care of widows, orphans, the sick and the aged. Christianity made all people equal with other members of the community, from the wealthiest to the slaves. In addition, it offered a personal relationship with God (Spielvogel 175).

In the beginning, Christianity was a flexible religion, adapting its rules and teachings based on the cultures it encountered. Christianity began from the teachings of Jesus, a Jew from Nazareth. Jesus’ mission was to prepare the Jews for the end of time, the apocalypse. His teachings taught of social equality, harmony, and the freedom of men to decide their own fate. After Jesus was crucified, the spread of his religion was taken up by a small number of his followers. James travelled to Palestine, Thaddeus went to Armenia, which, in the fourth century, would become the first official Christian state, and Peter went to Rome (Roman Religion). Although Jesus focused only on Jews, Paul reached out to everyone, Jews and Gentiles. He opened the doors of Christianity to all people, providing a “ universal foundation for the spread of Jesus’ ideas” (Spielvogel 171). Paul was determined that Christians should become evangelists, that they should

spread the truth about Jesus as the dead and risen god. He believed it was his responsibility to prepare as many people as possible for the upcoming apocalypse, as foretold by Jesus (Hooker). Later, Christianity showed its adaptability by embracing pagan holy days into Christian practice. It was this religion's ability to adapt to the many cultures and people it encountered that allowed it to spread so easily and so far. Paul was made a martyr in 65 A. D., beheaded by Nero, as was Peter (Guissepi). But by this time, Christian communities had sprung up in all the important cities of the Empire.

The spread of Christianity was also aided by the army. The monotheistic concept of Mithras was popular in the Legions, the basic units of the Roman army (Roman Religion). As the army travelled throughout the empire, the monotheistic concept travelled with it. The colonies established by veterans of the Legion helped Romanize the new territories, and allowed monotheism and Christianity to spread throughout the provinces. By the third century, Christianity had established itself, had a set of sacred books in the Gospels, and had established its own rituals with baptism and the Eucharist (PBS / WGBH Educational Foundation).

The reach of the Christian church was extensive. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Christianity spread to the kingdoms ruled by German kings, the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy, the Visigothic kingdom of Spain and to the Franks led by Clovis (Spielvogel 187-189). Germanic barbarians were converted to Christianity by Ulfilas, a Goth who converted to Arian Christianity (Knox). He spent forty years among the Visigoths, even translating the Bible into Gothic (Guissepi). In England, the withdrawal of the Roman armies led to the migration of the Angles and Saxons. Pope Gregory I
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sent a Benedictine mission to England in 596, where they helped the spread of Christianity (Guisepi). Patrick was another great missionary. Born in England about 389, he fled to Ireland to escape the Anglo-Saxon invaders, where he founded the Irish church. As a result of his work, monasteries were founded all over Ireland. They became renowned for their political and cultural influence, as well as their pursuit of scholarship (Guisepi). The Visigoths of Spain also converted to Arian Christianity, but perceiving that Arianism was a barrier to open relations with the rest of the Christian world they converted to Roman Catholic Christianity in the late sixth century (Spielvogel 189). With the spread of Christianity, the multiculturalism of Europe was standardized into a defined, single cultural entity.

Christianity would serve as the basis for the development of Western Civilization after the fall of Rome, giving rise to a new empire with the church at its head. The adoption of Christianity as the state religion of Rome became the most dramatic event in the history of early Christianity. Christianity as taught by Jesus was anti-political. Once again, Christianity would need to be flexible and change.

Galerius ruled the east as Augustus along with Constantius as Augustus in the west. He had a bitter hatred of Christians and persecuted them for over ten years until just before his death in 311. Realizing that persecution had failed and that Christianity was not going away, Galerius issued the Edict of Toleration, making Christianity a legal religion in the east (Alchin).

In 306 AD, Constantius died, and Constantine rose to Emperor in the West. Constantine was a worshipper of Sol Invictus, the Sun God. On the night

before a battle with Maxentius, his co-emperor, Constantine reportedly had a dream in which appeared to him a vision of the sign of Christ, the cross. He interpreted the dream as a symbol that he would be victorious in the battle. The next day Constantine battled and defeated Maxentius, thereby becoming sole western emperor. With his victory over Maxentius and as a consequence of his visionary dream, he began to emphatically support Christianity, believing his victory was due to the support of the Christian god. He began changing policy in Christianity's favor and to advance its cause. In 312 Constantine issued the Edict of Milan granting Christians freedom of worship throughout the Empire (Spielvogel 182). The Edict granted complete tolerance to all religions, but with the Emperor's vision and victory, it was Christianity that benefitted the most (Roman Religion).

Flavius Theodosius, also called Theodosius I, was Roman Emperor from 379 to 395. He was the last emperor to rule both the Eastern and Western Roman Empire (Wikipedia). In 380, the emperor Theodosius published the Edict of Thessalonica in order that " all subjects should profess the faith of the bishops of Rome and Alexandria" (Wikipedia), and made Christianity the official religion of the Empire (Spielvogel 182). From this point on, it was paganism that was illegal, and its practitioners were persecuted. Theodosius ordered the destruction of many pagan temples and landmarks including the Temple at Delphi and the Serapeum of Alexandria, and in 393 he even went so far as to ban the Olympic games as being too pagan (Guissepi).

In 390 the governor of Thessalonica was assassinated. In response, Emperor Theodosius ordered the massacre of over 7000 people. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, excommunicated Theodosius for his actions. He ordered the emperor <https://assignbuster.com/christianity-in-medieval-western-civilization-history-essay/>

to perform several months worth of public penance. Bishop Ambrose was the first church official to act on the church's superiority over the state (Guisepi). He would not be the last. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries it was customary for state rulers to appoint high ranking church officials (lay investiture). This became an issue of huge proportions when the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Henry IV wished to appoint his chaplain to the bishopric of Milan. Pope Gregory VII backed a different candidate. Previous Holy Roman Emperors had also believed it was within their right to appoint the pope. The dispute that ensued became known as the Investiture Controversy. Henry installed his choice as Bishop, and called a synod of bishops and had them depose Gregory as pope. Pope Gregory responded by excommunicating Henry. Henry risked his crown if he continued. He met with Gregory and apologized, and was ordered to do penance. Unfortunately, the struggle did not end there; it continued for fifty years, finally ending in 1122 with the Concordat of Worms (Spielvogel 286). Lay investiture was eliminated, but secular leaders would have some input, although unofficial, in the appointments. In addition, it was decided that the pope could only be selected a college of cardinals (Wikipedia). The pope became more powerful than the monarch.

The Christian Church centralized religious power by bringing uniformity to the faith. The Church was influenced by Roman tradition in how it was structured. When he restructured the empire during his reign from 284-305, Diocletian created an administrative system where he divided the empire into provinces. These provinces were grouped into dioceses, each headed by a vicar (Spielvogel 180). By the fourth century, the church had developed a

similar system of administration. Churches in villages were administered by priests. Priests were responsible to a bishop. A diocese was a section of territory under the jurisdiction of a bishop. A number of dioceses made up a province. The bishop of the most important city in each province was known as an archbishop (Spielvogel 183).

At first, there was no difference between the laity, the people of faith, and the clergy. Travelling teachers visited communities, giving advice and preaching as needed. But as time went on, the religion grew, and so did the number of followers. It became necessary to establish churches and officials who could meet the demands of this growing population. In the early days of Christianity, bishops were chosen by the Christian community. As the religion grew, the structure of the church developed into a hierarchy. The bishops gained more control and began to serve as church leaders. Presbyters assumed the role of the clergy, and were subject to bishops. By the 3rd century, bishops were chosen by the clergy and approved by the congregation. Once the bishop was approved, he was invested with priestly authority and officially ordained into the church (Spielvogel 175).

During the Roman Republic, it was the responsibility of the college of priests or pontiffs to ensure the correct rituals were being performed in order to keep the pagan gods satisfied. These pontiffs were headed by the pontifex maximus, or chief pontiff. This chief pontiff was the head of the state religion (Spielvogel 127). As Christianity spread and the power of the religion grew, the bishops of the larger cities also became more influential and powerful (Stockman, Christianity in the Classical World). The Roman bishop gradually became more powerful than the others, and was eventually recognized as <https://assignbuster.com/christianity-in-medieval-western-civilization-history-essay/>

the leader of the church (Guisepi). This led to the establishment of the doctrine of Petrine Supremacy by Pope Leo I. The Petrine Doctrine is based upon Catholic tradition, which holds that Peter was the first bishop of Rome and that his authority over all Christians passes onto his successors in Rome. The Doctrine upholds the legitimacy and supremacy of the Pope over all other bishops of the Catholic Church (Spielvogel 193).

In the first three hundred years that Christianity had existed, numerous interpretations of its doctrines had arisen throughout the Christian territories. Many of these were in direct opposition to others. In 325 at the Council of Nicaea, approximately 300 bishops from all over the empire met to discuss the state of their church. Christianity was then unified under a single set of rules and concepts called the Nicene Creed. The Creed established that there was one God, one set of rules and one way to practice the faith (Wikipedia).