The Greek and Roman Context of Early Christianity

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Within a few decades of Jesus’ death, his followers began to spread their message beyond their Jewish audience to gentiles—that is, to non-Jews, especially Greeks and Romans. The missionaries had to cope with religious world larger and more diverse than the Judaism within which the Jesus Movement had been born. It is to that wide religious context that we turn now. By Jesus lifetime, the Roman Empire had united under its control the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and much of the inland territory. Until about 175, the empire continued to expand. The migrations in the Mediterranean area that had been going on at least since the fourth century BCE intensified in the empire. The ancient migrants brought their gods with them, just as modern migrants do. In American history each wave of immigrants has meant new religions—mostly Protestants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (with small numbers of Jewish ad Catholic immigrants), large numbers of Catholics and Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, more recently, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and others. For several centuries peoples and religions mixed on a large scale in the Roman Empire. When Christian missionaries approached gentiles with their message, they encountered a complex situation where their hearers already had many religious choices. The modern opinion that the Roman Empire was somehow religiously deprived and yearned for Christianity is inaccurate. Christianity became one more choice in a religiously crowded society.

Modern popular culture, especially in films, tends to portray the ancient Greeks and Romans in a lurid light orgies, gross banquets, and gladiatorial fights. Roman life was coarser and cruder than would fit most modern American or European sensibilities. The gap between rich and poor was huge, slavery was prominent, sports that shed the blood of animals and human beings were wildly popular, and a sex industry that catered to every taste flourished. But there was another side to the picture. Christianity appeared when the Greco-Roman world was in the midst of a long-term religious revival, marked by a growing interest in otherworldly matters. It simplifies, but not too much to divide the religious development of the Greco-Roman world into three long phases. Before the fifth century BCE, the myths (“stories”) about the gods and the rituals to worship them developed. In the second phase from the fifth to first centuries BEC, many intellectuals in the Greek world embraced an intense skepticism about the traditional myths and rituals. Philosophers in particular kept up withering attack on traditional beliefs and practices. In fact, it is hard to think of any modern criticism of religion that was not expressed by someone in those centuries. Without the means of mass communication, the waves of doubt and criticism probably influenced only educated elites and some urban people. Agricultural societies are generally conservative. In the countryside there was no mass revolt against traditional religion, but in some places there was growing neglect of temples and rituals. Because Romans were generally more conservative than their Greek contemporaries, the criticism of their traditional religious ways was slower to emerge. But as Greek education permeated the Roman upper classes from the second century BCE onward, some Hellenized Romans expressed religious doubts. For instance, before Roman magistrates undertook any official action, they consulted the gods in a process called “augury.” Experts, called “augurs,” looked at the flight of birds or the entrails of animals to discern if the gods were favorable to a proposed undertaking. Augury was firmly rooted in Roman public religion and preceded many official actions even though some Romans expressed cynicism about it. Cato the Censor, a prominent Roman senator who died about 150 BCE, is said to have remarked that he could not understand why the examiners of entrails did not laugh when they encountered one another (Cicero, DC divinatone, 11.52). The age of religious skepticism did not last forever. The third phase of religious development began late in the first century BCE, when a wave of seriousness about religion began to build. The first Roman emperor, Augustus (31 BCE—14 CE), consciously presented himself as pious in the old ways. In a famous inscription in which he summed up his achievements, he boasted that he had restored eighty-two neglected temples in the city of Rome itself and that he had reinvigorated dying rituals. His actions were symptoms of a deepening concern with religion that continued for centuries, in fact, even beyond the end of the Roman Empire. Christianity emerged during this third phase of ancient religious development. On the one hand, the intense and growing interest in religion gave the Christians an audience. On the other hand, that same interest gave them many rivals.

The religious choices in the first-, second-, and third-century Roman Empire ranged across a broad spectrum, from state-supported temples and rituals to voluntary groups and on to freelance astrologers, magicians, healers, fortune-tellers, and philosophers. There was no limit on how many gods an inhabitant of the empire could embrace or abandon. This openness to adopting new religious practices without necessarily giving up the old ones can be called “adhesion”: It was possible for a person who worshipped several gods to adhere to more gods without abandoning the earlier ones. Only the Jews and the Christians, because they and demanded “conversion,” that is, that their believers abandon all other gods besides their God. Because the demand of the religious authorities was not always effective, we should not draw too sharp a line between second- and third-
century Christianity and its rivals. The attractions of the traditional religions must have been strong even for Christians. That is a reasonable conclusion from Christian literature, which is filled with denunciations of the gods and of those who worshiped their images. In order to make sense of the complex Greco-Roman religious life that the Christian missionaries encountered and in which Christians lived, I shall treat some important categories of religious expression—but in real life, Greeks and Romans sampled all sorts of religious activity in a range of choices that was potentially unlimited.

First we need a definition of “cult,” a word often used with reference to ancient religions. In modern speech, “cult” is often a negative way to refer to a smallish religious group of which one disapproves. That is not what is meant here. In the study of religion, “cult” is the word for the external, visible features that accompany the worship of any god. Every religion has its “cult,” that is, its own places for worship, objects, and practices of worship. Worshippers know, usually from past practice, what their god wants in his or her cult, whether it is simplicity or magnificence, words or actions, sacrifices of animals or not, images or no images, and so on. Cult is, then, a way of carrying out worship.

Official Cults

Every Greco-Roman community, from the humblest rural village to the mighty empire, held a deep conviction that the gods—its particular gods—were important to its well-being. Consequently governments at every level supported the worship of their gods, often at public expense. The public officials supported such things as altars, temples, sacrifices, processions, and festivals to honor the gods and keep their favor. Wealthy people were encouraged, even pressured, to subsidize public worship and were rewarded by public esteem, expressed in such things as statues and inscriptions that praised the donors. The leaders of the Roman state visualized their relation to the Roman gods as a treaty, called the pax deorum (“the peace of the gods”). At the core of the treaty, magistrates promised on behalf of the Roman state to offer correct worship to the gods in return for divine favor. The magistrates were very careful to keep their promises. They believed that the gods generally wanted the sacrifice of animals. For instance, Jupiter was worshipped in his great temple in Rome with the carefully orchestrated killing of bulls, rams, and boars. Rural communities often sacrificed to their gods and goddesses on simple open-air altars. Heads of individual households offered wheat cakes and other humble food to their family gods, whose images were in their homes.

These official cults had no creed in the Christian sense, no tight set of required beliefs. Because most people thought that what the gods wanted was reverence expressed in proper cult, the worshiper’s beliefs were a secondary matter. The state-sponsored temples and rituals generally did not have professional priests. The magistrates performed the ceremonies, with experts in religious lore at their elbows, telling them what must and must not be said and done. State-sponsored worship was careful, carried out by public officials acting in front of an altar or behind the closed doors of a temple. The temples were built as the god’s house, not as a place where congregations gathered, in the important public rituals, private individuals had only a secondary role, perhaps just to stand in the crowd watching the magistrates do their religious duty. At every level of society, these official cults went on at state expense until the fourth century, when Christian emperors gradually withdrew their support, which they transferred to the Christian church’s clergy, buildings, and rituals. Christianity then became the official way, the official cult, to worship God.

Because the official cults were primarily the religions of groups, carried out for the safety and prosperity of society as a whole, they had only a small role for the individual citizen, who swelled the crowd while the magistrates carried out the rites or who joined in the festivals of eating, drinking, singing, and dancing that honored the gods. The official cults were serious matters because society’s welfare was thought to depend on them. This is why modem notions of separation of church and state do not fit the ancient world. Most ancient people believed that preserving a correct relationship with the gods was as important to the state as maintaining a sufficient army. The official cults usually promised nothing specifically to individuals, except insofar as they benefited from the safety and prosperity of society. Because some official cults could draw on the great wealth of the state and of rich donors, particularly the emperor, they possessed the fine temples and statues that still amaze visitors to Italy, Greece, or Turkey or to a museum well-stocked in ancient art.

Jews were not entirely exempt from the views of their pagan contemporaries. Like the pagan gods, the Jewish God demanded the sacrifice of animals and other things in his Temple at Jerusalem. In other ways, however, the God of the Jews was unusual when compared with the gods of the Greeks and Romans. He was a “jealous” god, that is, he demanded exclusive worship from his followers: “I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God....” (Exodus 20:2—5). In contrast, the Greco-Roman gods were not “jealous.” Most Greeks and Romans did not believe that their gods were the only gods. On the contrary, they were sure that all peoples had their own gods who should be worshipped in whatever way was traditional. The Roman authorities were generally tolerant in religious matters and ordinarily did not upset local religious arrangements, probably because disrupting other people’s religions is a sure way to produce a rebellion. In addition, Romans hoped to win the support of the gods of the people whom they conquered. Every community subject to the Roman Empire was allowed, even encouraged, to carry on its traditional official cults. However, Roman religious tolerance was not unlimited. The Roman authorities sometimes had hesitations about how far Roman citizens could go in adding other religions to their practices. Initially, they were slow to allow foreign cults inside the sacred boundary—the pomerium—of the city of Rome itself or to allow Roman citizens to join in the worship of foreign gods. But over time those barriers broke down. During the imperial period, Roman citizens enjoyed the same wide religious choices as everyone else. The Roman authorities would not tolerate religions that promoted anti-Roman feeling. For example, the druids, priests of the Celtic religion, resisted Roman rule in
Britain and were ruthlessly suppressed. Sometimes the Romans frowned on rituals that they thought too barbaric to tolerate, such as human sacrifice, which the Druids practiced in addition to their resistance to Roman rule. Groups, including religious groups, that met in secret or at night might be repressed because the Roman magistrates feared plots against their rule. For instance, the Roman magistrate Pliny (about 61—about 112) suppressed fire brigades in northern Asia Minor because he was uneasy about their meetings and unsure of their loyalty.

The official cults were conservative but not completely static. The last century of the Roman Republic (133—31 BCE) had been disrupted by bloody civil wars, political murders, brutal exploitation of subject peoples, and frightening insecurity. As a result, Roman citizens and conquered subjects were grateful when Octavian, later called “Augustus,” defeated his rivals Anthony and Cleopatra in 31 BCE and brought peace and stability. Their gratitude to the emperors was expressed in religious terms. In the eastern Mediterranean, people had for centuries treated their rulers as gods. When the empire spread into the east, the new subjects began to worship both living and deceased Roman emperors. At first the Romans, who had no tradition of worshipping their rulers, were reluctant to participate in the worship of living emperors but acknowledged that the Senate could deify—make into gods—deceased emperors who were judged worthy of the honor. After his assassination in 44 BCE, the Senate granted Julius Caesar divine status, with a publicly funded temple and priests within the city of Rome. When the emperor Augustus died in 14 CE, he was accorded divine honors. An important person swore that he saw the Augustus’ spirit ascending to heaven out of the flames of his funeral pyre. The Senate deified most deceased emperors but refused the honor to those of whom it disapproved. Living emperors were in a hazy intermediate zone: not yet gods but potentially gods. In the later first, second, and third centuries, the goddess Roma, who personified Rome, and the reigning emperor (or his genius, a sort of life spirit) were joined as the focus of an important official cult. They were honored with priesthoods, altars, statues, temples, animal sacrifices, laudatory inscriptions, and annual festivals. The cult of Roma and the emperor was patriotic, a sign of loyalty, and a force for unity in a diverse empire. The worship of living emperors grew in importance as their position grew in power. Many cults around the empire added emperor worship to their existing practices. In fact, the religious life of the empire was restructured to integrate the emperor into it. For instance, Jews would not worship the emperor, but until the beginning of the Jewish Revolt in 66, the Jewish priests at Jerusalem prayed for the emperor every day in the Temple. Christians never had a formal ritual of prayer for the pagan emperor, although some second-century defenders of Christianity wrote that Christians prayed for emperors. Over time, the Roman emperors became the most powerful figures in every aspect of Roman society, including religion. When the Christians refused to participate in the cult of Roma and Augustus because their god was “jealous,” they brought down on themselves the wrath of the Roman state and suffered persecution.

Voluntary Cults

Greco-Roman civilization achieved remarkable things, even though modern people are sometimes repelled by the fact that ancient urban life was built on the exploitation of the rural majority and on slavery. By 150, it had attained a level of literacy that was not seen again in the West until the sixteenth century and a level of urban comfort not achieved until the eighteenth century. For about 250 years (31 BCE—235 CE), called the “Pax Romana” (“the Roman Peace”), the empire unified the Mediterranean shores and their hinterlands into a large zone of peace, stability, and trade—something never achieved again. The official cults were important directly to the state and indirectly to individuals, but they did not try to satisfy the personal religious desires of individuals. To put it another way, the official cults sought to guarantee immortality for the group—Roman coins proclaimed “Roma Aeterna” (“Eternal Rome”)—but not for individuals. Greco-Roman culture had no single, firm belief in a personal afterlife. For pagans who did believe in an afterlife, it was often imagined not as a paradise but rather as a sad, cold, dark place. Greco-Roman society also had no firm belief in progress. Common ancient views of history were either cyclical, that is, things repeated themselves over vast stretches of time, or degenerative, that is, the world had declined from a golden age to ever worse conditions. In addition, the Roman Empire was not invigorated by powerful movements that swept up individuals in a cause bigger than themselves. There was, for instance, nothing comparable with an anti-slavery movement, a feminist movement, an ecological movement, or a democratic movement that gives meaning to many modern peoples’ lives. As memories of the Roman Republic faded and the emperors became more dictatorial, ordinary citizens found it safer to be politically passive. The mobility characteristic of the empire, both from country to city and from one region to another, fed the anxiety of many ordinary people, who must have felt rootless, cut off from their ancestral homes, relatives, and religions. Life was biologically fragile in ways we find hard to imagine. Medicine was primitive and mostly ineffective. Life expectancies were low. There was no insurance, only a rudimentary welfare system, and no workmen’s compensation. If a worker broke a leg or died, his widow and orphans could live in terrible poverty or could starve to death. The legal system was harsh to the lower classes, which included slaves, freedmen, and foreigners, who had few of what we call “civil rights.” Many people, who had nothing against which to contrast their lives, took all this as normal, but they had significant reasons for anxiety and fear.

Some ancient concepts of the universe also fed fear. The gods of Mount Olympus, such as Zeus, Hera, and Athena, and their Roman counterparts, Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, were not alone in the universe. Few people doubted that there were uncountable, unnamable, invisible powers that could help or hurt humans. The angels and devils of the Bible are well-known examples, but they jostled for space with lots of others. Paul, for instance, spoke of dominions, powers, and principalities
that were apparently cosmic beings (Col 1:16). In Greek, such beings were called daimones, which is the origin of the English word “demon,” but originally not every daimon was thought to be evil. Some would or at least could help their human followers. Many Greeks and Romans had the fatalistic feeling that they were playthings of daimones who controlled, helped, hurt, and even tormented them. The widespread worship of the goddess Fortuna (“Luck”) grew out of the sense that the unseen powers in the universe were arbitrary and that such a goddess might help. The state religions offered little or no help for an individual to deal with the daimones.

The ruling elites and intellectuals ate and dressed better than the lower classes, but they were not untouched by fear and anxiety. Bacteria and viruses killed them, too. In addition, the upper classes, including the senatorial aristocracy, had special reasons for fear that emerged from their high status and wealth. Emperors feared attempts to assassinate them (they had good reason to fear them). Such attempts almost always originated with the powerful people around them. Some emperors struck out after detecting a plot or on mere suspicion. A considerable number of senators were killed and their property was confiscated. Many in the upper classes had an acquaintance or relative who had perished in a suspected or unsuccessful plot.

The literature of the Greeks and Romans was generally produced by and for the upper classes. It contains remarkable, beautiful achievements, such as the Greek iliad and Odyssey attributed to Homer and the Latin Aeneid of Virgil, which have influenced Western civilization to the present time. But by and large classical literature offered little hope for a better future. By the second century CE, literature was increasingly marked by feelings of alienation from the world and by a contemplative resignation to fate. Divisions of body from soul and matter from spirit grew sharper, with body and matter regarded as inferior, if not evil. The Roman writer Seneca (about 4 BCE—65 CE), who committed suicide at the command of his former pupil, the Emperor Nero (54—68), expressed the view that the body and the world are pointless and empty and that life is short. To avoid slavery to one’s desires, he recommended that his readers put aside striving for wealth and fame. They should be constantly ready to die (Seneca, Natural Questions, bk. III, preface, c. 16). This effort to maintain a stiff upper lip in the face of fear and hopelessness was the creed of only an educated few, but it might have nourished in them a sense of anxiety or at least resignation.

One can emphasize too much the notion of anxiety—there were no doubt many ancient people content with their lives, including perhaps the overwhelming majority who lived in the countryside and observed the seasonal rhythms of agricultural life and traditional worship. But in an age of rising religious interest, the traditional state cults, which had never been personal religions, were supplemented by cults that offered something to individuals, who often sought from the gods security and material well-being in this world and a happy situation after death. Perhaps in response to growing individual desires, the first-, second-, and third-century empire bumbled with religious ferment and individual religious choices. Alongside the state-supported cults, individuals supported voluntary cults that had their own officials, rituals, meeting places, and beliefs. The religious history of the empire can be visualized as a flow of these unofficial cults from the religiously creative eastern Mediterranean into the rest of the empire. Judaism and Christianity followed that pattern, but so did many other cults. Generally, the voluntary cults did not demand absolute allegiance: A person could join as many as his or her time and wealth allowed (initiation into some cults could be quite expensive) while also honoring the state religion, worshipping the emperor and the goddess Roma, and consulting astrologers or magicians. Judaism and Christianity were exceptions in demanding the complete allegiance of their members, not always successfully. Between the first and third centuries, the voluntary cults expressed a bewildering variety of beliefs and practices. But we can make sense of much (not all) of the complexity if we remember that the voluntary cults generally responded to personal, practical needs—to help individual people escape from fear, from the power of the daimones, and from the power of fate.

Some of the most important voluntary cults are called “mystery religions” because their central beliefs and rituals were revealed only to members who had been initiated into them step by step. The adherents to mystery religions took the secrecy seriously, so that we often do not know the “mystery,” although we can reconstruct some of it from literary references, inscriptions, and archaeological remains. The mystery religions differed widely in details, but generally they promised adherents three things: a rebirth of some sort, purification from guilt and sin, and immortality. A mystery religion usually had three interrelated components: a story or myth about the god(s) of the mystery cult, a ritual that in some way acted out that story, and a secret interpretation that explained to the initiated person what the myth and the ritual meant personally for him or her. Initiation into a mystery religion was designed to be an emotionally moving, life-changing experience, sometimes called an “enlightenment.” Dio Chrysostom (between 40 and 50—after 110) described initiation into the mysteries: “... if anyone were to place a man, a Greek or a barbarian, in some mystic shrine of extraordinary beauty and size to be initiated, where he would see many mystic sights and hear many mystic voices, where light and darkness would appear to him alternately, and a thousand other things would occur; and further, if it should be just as in the rite called enthronement, where the inducting priests make the novices sit down and then dance round and round them—is it likely that the man in this situation would not be moved in his mind and would not suspect that all which was taking place was the result of a more than wise intention and preparation, even if he belonged to the most remote and nameless barbarians...?” (Dio Chrysostom, The Twelfth, or Olympic, Discourse, c. 33 in Dio Chrysostom with an English translation by J. H. Cohoon, LCL no. 339 [Cambridge, MA, and London, 1939], vol. 2, pp. 34—37, altered).

Hungry from fasting, exhausted from lack of sleep, excited, fearful, full of expectations, the initiates into some mystery cults thought they gained profound insights that saved them from fear and oppression by the daimones and other cosmic forces. The initiates, who were a tiny minority of the empire’s population, sought salvation, which was often interpreted in practical ways: long life, healing from illness, safe completion of a sea voyage, success in business or in war or in love, and the like. Four examples of voluntary cults, chosen out of many, will make the range of personal religious choices clearer. Christianity and Judaism had to compete in this marketplace of religious choices.
Rebirth at Eleusis

The Eleusinian mysteries, which were unusual because they could be performed at only one place, Eleusis, about twelve miles from Athens, originated in ancient rituals based on the visible cycle of seasonal death and rebirth of vegetation. At the core of the Eleusinian mysteries was the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Hades, the god of the underworld, kidnapped Demeter’s daughter Persephone and brought her to the underworld. In her grief, Demeter ceased to protect vegetation, which died. Zeus, Persephone’s father, persuaded Hades to let the girl come back into the upper world, but by a trick Hades made sure she had to return periodically to him in the underworld. Hence, when Persephone was in the upper world with her mother Demeter, vegetation flourished, and when she was in the underworld with her husband Hades, vegetation died. At Eleusis, the observation that vegetation “died” in the autumn and was “reborn” in the spring was applied to individuals: They could die and be reborn through rituals. The celebrations and initiations at Eleusis took place in late September or early October. There was a public aspect to the Eleusinian mysteries. A procession from Athens to Eleusis culminated at night in a building capable of holding thousands—it was perhaps the largest building in Greece. There was also a secret aspect. The people to be initiated were washed to purify them. They were shown visual representations of the myth of Demeter and Persephone to reveal the myth’s real meaning, which was probably interpreted as referring to their own rebirth. The Eleusinian mysteries were immensely prestigious. Emperors, generals, and wealthy people were initiated. In our time, billionaires, rock stars, and trendy actors would flock there. The Christian Emperor Theodosius (378—395) prohibited them in 393, and in 396 invaders looted and destroyed the thousand-year-old sanctuary where the mysteries had been celebrated.

The Cult of Mithras

The Eleusinian mysteries were sober, Greek, high-toned, and ancient. Some mystery religions attracted followers in part because they had a colorful and exotic origin, which was adapted to the tastes of Greeks and Romans. Unlike the agrarian mysteries at Eleusis, which were tied to one shrine, many of the exotic mysteries had missionaries or at least devotees who spread them to many places. The myth of the warrior god Mithras was a version of the widespread contrast between light and darkness or between good and evil. Mithras, a Persian god, led the forces of light against those of darkness. The main symbol of Mithraism was a statue of Mithras cutting the throat of a bull, which was the embodiment of evil. The rites of Mithras took place in a cave, called a “Mithraeum” because Mithras had been born in a cave. If there was no natural cave, believers built an artificial one in a dark room or even underground. The Mithraea were generally small. Archaeologists have found many Mithraea, including about sixty in the city of Rome alone. The cult of Mithras was open only to men and was especially popular with soldiers. A man initiated into the mystery of Mithras passed through seven stages until he knew the complete myth and its real meaning. At each stage of initiation, there was a visual display or play that conveyed new information. The culmination was a meal of bread and wine at which the initiate communed with his fellow initiates and with Mithras himself.

The Cult of Isis

Egyptian “wisdom” had great prestige because it was thought to be unimaginably old. Egyptian religion fascinated many because it was so different from Greek and Roman religions. Egypt had mummies of people and animals, gods with the heads of animals, mysterious hieroglyphics, and pharaohs who married their sisters. The Egyptian goddess Isis gained many adherents outside of Egypt, although her cult was Hellenized to make it more attractive to Greek worshippers. The myth underlying the cult of Isis fit the pattern of death and rebirth. In the story, the god Seth killed and dismembered his brother Osiris, also known as “Serapis.” Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris/Serapis, gathered his scattered remains. He was restored to life as Lord of the Underworld, The annual reenactment of Osiris/Serapis’ death, Isis’ search for his remains, and his rebirth was the public ritual that presented the myth for all to see. The cult of Isis had an Egyptian air about it—Egyptian music in the temples, hieroglyphics, and actual Egyptians as priests with shaved heads and special clothing who carried on daily worship of Isis in temples called “Isaea.” Accompanied by hymns and prayers, the goddess was awakened each morning, clothed, given food, worshipped, and solemnly put to bed in the evening.

Individuals were initiated privately into the mysteries of Isis during an elaborate light and sound show. In his Metamorphoses (sometimes called The Golden Ass), Apuleius of Madaura (about 125—about 170) wrote a description of initiation into the cult of Isis. His book’s hero, Lucius, had been turned into an ass by magic. After many adventures, Isis restored him to human form. In gratitude, Lucius began to worship her and was eventually initiated into her cult. Lucius warned, perhaps teased, the readers of the Metamorphoses that he could not tell them everything. But some of the atmosphere and emotion surrounding an individual’s initiation into the cult of Isis are accessible to us. Lucius described in guarded language his night of visions and extraordinary experiences that accompanied his initiation.

Therefore listen, but believe: these things are true. I came to the boundary of death and, having trodden the threshold of Proserpina, I traveled through all the elements and returned. In the middle of the night I saw the sun flashing with bright light. I came face to face with the gods below and the gods above and paid reverence to them from close hand.

After Lucius had been initiated, he was dressed as a god and probably worshipped (temporarily) in the very temple of Isis:

When morning came and the ceremonies were completed, I came forth wearing twelve robes as a sign of consecration. This is very holy attire, but no obligation prevents me from talking about it since at that time a great many people were present and saw it. Following instructions I stood on a wooden platform set up in the very centre of the holy shrine in front of the goddess’s statue, the focus of attention because of my garment, which was only linen, but elaborately embroidered.... In my right hand I carried a torch alight with flames, and my
Lucius regarded his initiation into Isis’ cult as the turning point of his life. He loved the goddess and believed that she personally protected him.

The Cult of the Great Mother

The cult of isis was dignified and moral, but some of the mystery religions were rooted in fertility rites that depended for their power on sexual acts and the shedding of blood. The worship of the Great Mother, sometimes called “Cybele,” was deep rooted in Anatolia, which is a region in modern Turkey. Contact between Romans and the Great Mother began in the Roman Republic. The Romans feared defeat by the Carthaginian general Hannibal. At the command of an oracle, they brought the Great Mother to Rome in 204 BCE. She was entitled to be worshipped in her usual way, but the Romans were shocked when they saw what that involved. The priests of the Great Mother were eunuchs who had cut off their genitals and offered them to her. Their behavior imitated the myth of Attis, the lover of the Great Mother, who was unfaithful to her and was castrated for his sin. One feature of the Great Mother’s cult was the spectacular public ceremony of the taurobolium: The person to be initiated crouched in a pit covered with wooden planks; a bull was slaughtered above him to drench him in blood. When the initiate emerged from the pit, he was adored by other worshippers as one who had escaped from ordinary life. As an inscription from 376 put it, he was “reborn unto eternity.” The ever-practical Romans hit on a solution to keep the Great Mother’s favor and at the same time to shield the Roman citizenry from her bloody, unseemly rites. They allowed devotees and priests from Asia Minor to worship her behind closed doors in their temple at Rome. But gradually the barriers broke down, and by the first century BCE, Roman citizens could participate in the cult of the Great Mother.

Thus, there were voluntary forms of worship to suit almost every temperament, from the exclusive, high-toned mysteries celebrated at Eleusis to the bloody sexual mutilations practiced by the devotees of the Great Mother. As Christianity spread in the gentile world, many people probably classified it as a voluntary religious association with its own rituals and beliefs that were made known in detail only to the initiated, which in the case of Christianity meant the baptized members.

Astrology, Oracles, Magicians

Alongside the state cults and the voluntary cults, a vast number of religious entrepreneurs also provided services in return for a fee. The variety of these entrepreneurs is bewildering, but we can make sense of many of them if we recall that they were offering practical services for which their clients were willing to pay. Because the world was thought to be in the power of good and evil spiritual beings, people who could find ways to please or control them hoped to get along or even to escape an unhappy fate. The religious entrepreneurs promised to help people cope with such negative forces as the evil daimones, and the power of fate, fear, and ignorance.

Astrology flourished in response to the desire to know the future. Astrology was rooted in the belief that the stars were daemons or at least the homes of daemons; which controlled people born under their influence. There was an abundant literature describing the nature of the cosmic powers and explaining how to control or escape them. Astrology was a serious matter for individuals and for the government. For instance, to ask an astrologer about the death of an emperor was an offense that could bring on a death sentence. Every now and then, Roman officials took measures against astrologers, especially those who gave their advice without witnesses or inquired into the time that anyone would die. But generally, astrologers flourished in the empire.

Oracles also flourished in the empire. At certain favored places, a god was believed to speak, usually through a priest or priestess. An Egyptian papyrus preserves ninety-two common questions posed to an oracle. As you might expect, they are the problems that in our society might appear in a personal advice column. Oracle-seekers wanted to know about their finances, the situation of distant loved ones, whether they were going to get a job or a spouse, and how long they were going to live.

Wonder-workers and magicians were also common figures who found welcome even in the highest social circles. They also gave advice about personal problems, made amulets to ward off evil, interpreted dreams, and even worked cures. But they were also suspected of being able to cause deaths and to force people to fall in love. When Jesus’ followers claimed that he cured the sick and expelled demons, that claim had less impact than we might expect because Greeks and Romans could quite easily categorize him as one of the magicians and wonder-workers with whom they were quite familiar.

There were some intellectuals who criticized the religious entrepreneurs. The second-century pagan satirist Lucian of Samosata delighted in debunking what he saw as their frauds. In one of his satires he denounced Alexander of Abunoteichos, who had ingeniously created an oracle at which the healing god Asclepius appeared in the form of a snake. Lucian was disgusted that so many people rushed to pray to the snake/god, from whom they sought wealth, health, and other gifts (Lucian, Alexander the False Prophet, ch. 12—16). But as the wave of intense religiosity grew stronger, skeptics grew quieter, even disappeared. Virtually everyone—pagan, Jew, and Christian—took astrology, oracles, and magic seriously. Christians disapproved of magic, oracles, and the like but did not deny their reality. They interpreted them as tricks of evil daemons. Some Christians consulted astrologers, wonder-workers, and amulet makers, much to the annoyance of their leaders.

Some educated pagans had doubts about the thick cloud of gods, goddesses, and daemons who were so prominent in popular religion. Such people might participate in all sorts of religious cults, but they could be monotheists of a vague sort who believed that there might be just one god behind the names of the many gods. The Romans had a long tradition of merging gods who had different names but shared similar characteristics. For instance, the Greek god Zeus, who
Philosophies

In the intensifying religious atmosphere of the Roman Empire, many educated people turned to philosophers for guidance on how to cope with the problems of life. The study of philosophy in the Roman Empire was a prestigious pursuit; in fact, it was the very top of the intellectual hierarchy, rivaled only by the study of rhetoric. Philosophical training was long, expensive, and often involved seeking out prominent teachers in the philosophical tradition that the student found most convincing. Athens remained an important center for the teaching of philosophy, although there were other places as well. In many cities, there were philosophers who opened a school and taught disciples. Some philosophers had personal fortunes or lived on students’ fees, but others were employed by rich people as tutors for children and as advisers (almost chaplains) for the master and mistress of the house. There were about a half-dozen competing philosophical traditions, sometimes called “schools,” that claimed to teach what prominent Greek philosophers of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, including Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, had taught. By Roman times, these philosophical traditions had hardened into relatively fixed systems of belief that were passed from masters to disciples. They were comparable in some ways with modern religious denominations or with the circles of disciples who gather around a modern charismatic preacher, television psychologist or guru.

The detailed teachings of the philosophical schools differed widely, but what they had in common was that they gave ethical and moral advice about how to live or at least how to cope. Many upper-class Romans favored the Stoic philosophy, founded by Zeno in the fourth century BCE. Stoicism taught that the universe was permeated with reason, called “logos” in Greek, which was benevolent, positive, and just, but it was not a person. Some Stoics were troubled by “unreasonable” things such as slavery, war, and poverty. But they thought that in the long run, the reason shaping the universe would correct these examples of unreason. Because all humans are part of a grand design that is rational, Stoics thought that reason had put everyone—rich, poor, slave, free, well, ill—in a place for a purpose. Wise men or women—that is, the Stoics—chose to live in accord with reason, to accept their lot, and to control their desires. The Stoics taught their adherents how to achieve *apatheia*, which did not mean “apathy” but rather “tranquility,” that is, freedom from tension within yourself or between yourself and others. They also taught that people could gain “self-sufficiency” by restricting their desires: If you do not desire a thing you cannot have, then you are not tortured by the lack of it. Stoicism had a limited appeal because it demanded a great deal from its followers, although Stoics came from many walks of life. One important Stoic teacher, Epictetus, was a former slave; another prominent Stoic, Marcus Aurelius, was an emperor. But in general, Stoicism tended to attract well-educated and probably prosperous people. Romans in particular were attracted to Stoicism because it emphasized devotion to duty, which was an important cultural value for them. Stoicism could encourage a passive attitude toward life, but Romans reshaped it to fit their more vigorous view of how to live. They saw in it a call to do the best one could wherever one was, If a Stoic was a general, a magistrate, or an emperor, the reason of the universe had put him in that position and he must behave in an honorable way. Stoicism encouraged a high-minded view that all in authority should treat justly those under their control. Stoicism probably influenced early Christianity. Both a Stoic and a Christian would agree to the statements: “I have been put here for a reason,” “I must do what is right,” and “I must control my desires.” Paul used Stoic terminology to explain Christian ideas. For instance, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, he tried to counter the Corinthian Christians’ disorders and religious one-upmanship by emphasizing the stoic image of a body in which each part has its function and all parts are needed to make a perfect body. Luke wrote that Paul used Stoic ideas in his speech to educated pagans at Athens (see Acts 17:22—31). In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul used a common, perhaps Stoic discussion of the parts of a body united to create a harmonious whole when he defended the underlying unity in the Corinthians’ diversity of spiritual gifts. But there were significant differences between Stoicism and Christianity. Unlike Christians, Stoics did not believe in a personal God who cared about humans and to whom humans could pray. But Stoics’ views on the harmony of the universe as well as their calls for strict moral conduct appealed to Christian thinkers.

Another philosophical tradition, Epicureanism, founded by Epicurus (341—270 BCE), taught that humans needlessly feared the gods and death. Epicureans explained how those disturbing fears could be eliminated. Epicurus taught that the gods existed but did not trouble themselves about human beings: They hurt no one, and they helped no one. He also assured followers that death was not to be feared. He expounded what might be called “Epicurean physics.” Tiny particles, called “atoms”
reality grew greater the further one got from matter. Neo-
would be rewards and punishments after death, that reality grew greater the further one got from matter. Neo-

In the fourth century BCE, several philosophers contributed to a stream of philosophical thought called “Cynicism.” Do not be misled by the modern meaning of that word. In Greek, it means “like a dog.” It refers to philosophers who saw in the dog a kind of freedom from conventional behavior that humans should adopt. The Cynics loved to violate ordinary practices and to live free from moral and social restraints. They wanted a “natural” life, free from the need to conform to society’s artificial ways. Some adopted a wandering life wearing a short cloak, not cutting their hair or beards, and rejecting wealth. They spoke in public places, denouncing or ridiculing every form of ordinary social and religious behavior. Their vigorous oral attacks on the existence of the gods and on what ordinary people thought of as right were called “diatribes.” Christians sometimes adopted for their use Cynic attacks on the pagan gods. Christian preachers might have imitated the diatribe in their own denunciations of the world around them. Christian ascetics may have imitated some aspects of the poverty and simplicity of the Cynic philosopher’s life.

Platonism was the most widely admired philosophical school between the second and sixth centuries CE. Plato (about 429—347 BCE) taught in the grove of Academos at Athens, so his school has been called the “Academy.” Plato had written twenty-five philosophical dialogues in which his teacher Socrates (about 470—399 BCE) was the central figure. Plato’s Socrates prodded, criticized, and challenged his fellow discussers on profound questions that concerned ethics, politics, and education. In addition to being great literature, Plato’s dialogues inspired a long succession of teachers in the Platonic Academy at Athens and elsewhere. Over more than nine hundred years, the Platonic school changed. When Christian thinkers encountered Platonism, it was what is called “Middle Platonism” (about 68 BCE—about 250 CE) and then Neo-Platonism (about 250—about 500). Christian thinkers pointed to some Platonic teachings as precursors or dim reflections of their beliefs. Plato and his followers taught that the soul was immaterial, that there would be rewards and punishments after death, that reality grew greater the further one got from matter. Neo-

Platonists encouraged their followers to transcend their burdensome bodies and rise toward that which was most real, which they called “the Good, the Beautiful, the One and the First.” If I had to pick one Platonic belief that influenced Christianity, it would be the teaching about the nature of God. For the Platonists, the origin of everything is the being called “the One” (also called “the First”), who/which was beyond description and beyond human understanding. The One was perfect in itself, serene and unimaginably distant from the created world. The One had no direct contact with the world in which humans lived. Instead the One brought the world of matter into existence through intermediaries. By a process called “emanation,” literally “an outflowing,” a cascade of beings flowed out from the One, but each emanated being was less like the being from which it emanated because it was further away from the ultimate source, the One. The One emanated from itself the Logos or Word, which could also be called “Intelligence.” The Logos emanated the World Soul. Thus, the Platonists taught that at the heart of the universe there is a three, a triad. The visible world, which the Platonists regard as not quite real, was far down in the long chain of emanations. But in humans there was an immaterial soul that yearned to climb up so as to be united with the One.

The influence of philosophy was greater than the number of philosophers of their disciples might suggest. First, the man or woman in the street, angry at Christians for their rejection of society’s gods and their political disloyalty, occasionally attacked Christians physically. But people with philosophical training were equipped to attack Christianity intellectually. Second, some of the intellectual leaders of Christianity, including Justin Martyr (died in 165), had received philosophical training, which they used to defend Christianity from their pagan counterparts. In their efforts to refute philosophers’ arguments against Christianity, philosophically educated Christians adopted or adapted philosophical arguments for their own use. Christian theology was often formulated in terms that Christian thinkers borrowed from philosophy, especially Platonic philosophy, which Christian thinkers thought was most compatible with their religion. Third, the Christian criticism of the gods and popular religion owed a great deal to the criticism that philosophers had expressed for centuries.

Thus, Christianity did not spread out of Judaism into a context of irreligion or unbelief. Quite the opposite, the Greco-Roman world of the first, second, and third centuries was deeply concerned with religion and the other world. Many people sought to find out how to live well and happily. Christianity had many rivals.