Religion in the Roman Empire (4 March 2002)

Religion in Ancient Rome
From Jupiter to Christ

Religion in Western Civ.

Developing Religious Groups

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Part 1 of 2

Developing Religious Groups

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Part 2 of 2
Religion in Ancient Rome

- “State religion” -- worship of local deities concerned with the health of the civic community
  - highly ritualized -- emphasis on accurate performance of the rituals, rather than on “faith”
  - as Rome encompassed more territory, practice of the state religion became a test of political loyalty
- eventually, the Roman state religion absorbed the Olympian pantheon of traditional Greek religion

I. The Imperial State Religion

- With the acquisition of territories in the Eastern Mediterranean, Rome came to control societies that had the tradition of worshipping their ruler as a god (Egypt, etc.)
  - Emperors were concerned that encouraging this practice in the East would create controversy in Rome
  - created the worship of “the divine spirit of Rome” as an alternative
- Became common practice to deify emperors after their deaths
- Worship of the Emperor -- or of Rome -- became a test of loyalty throughout the Empire
Augustus: A Man for All Seasons

Cult of Roma et Augustae
The Ara Pacis

II. “Romanized” Greek Gods

- Greek - Roman
  - Zeus - Jupiter
  - Hera - Juno
  - Athena - Minerva
  - Hermes - Mercury
  - Ares - Mars

For additional info, see www.roman-empire.net/children/gods.html.
III. The mystery religions

- Practice of the Roman state religion did not exclude practice of another religion
  - Roman state religion focused on ritual, not emotional satisfaction
  - To find emotional connections -- "faith" -- the people often turned to cults, most of which came from the East
- Mystery religions promised to illuminate the "mystery of immortality" to their adherents
  - generally involved ritual initiation, ritual communal worship with others of the faith

Mystery religions included...

- Cult of Bacchus, the Greek god of wine
  - immortality achieved through drunken dissipation, which freed the spirit
- Mithraism
  - worship of Mithras, an ancient Indo-Iranian god of truth and light
  - an offshoot of Zoroastrianism
- Worship of Isis, Egyptian mother goddess
- Worship of the Jewish god
  - non-Jewish worshippers known as "God-fearers"

See Noble, p. 197
Religion in the Roman Empire (4 March 2002)

Mithraism

See image in Noble, p. 198

Judaism

• Dates from around the time of the Exodus from Egypt: c. 1200 BC
• Based on the Covenant
  – The Hebrews will worship God (referred to in texts as YHWH)
  – The Hebrews will adhere to God’s laws (the ten commandments)
  – God will designate the Hebrews as his “chosen people”

Unique theological characteristics of Judaism

• Monotheistic
• God is all-powerful and the creator of all things
• God presides over nature, he does not reside in nature
• the relationship between God and his worshippers is paternal
• God behaves in ethical (and predictable) ways
• God demands moral conduct of his followers – morality judged by adherence to the Law
Judaism and Rome

- The Jewish ruling classes had voluntarily allied with Rome in 63 BCE after a period of civil conflict

- Since Judaism not only did not permit Jews to worship of other gods, but even denied the existence of other gods, Romans viewed Jews as intolerant, impious, and a danger to civil order

- Because Jews were a tiny minority and an "ancient race", the practice of Judaism was allowed by Roman authorities

Map 7.1a

The Home of Judaism, 323 B.C.E-500 C.E.

From Judaism to Christianity

See Noble, p. 191-94
The rise of Christianity

- Context: Judaism
- Recall the history of the Jews to their absorption into the Roman Empire
  - Throughout their history, the Jews had been dominated by larger imperial powers
  - Maintained their separate identity through the elaboration and solidification of their religious traditions
  - Desired liberation from outside domination

Messiah

- Predicted by Jewish religious tradition, a liberator who would “free the Jews” and establish “the Kingdom of God”
  - Was the Messiah a political, military, or religious liberator?
  - Was the Kingdom an earthly or a heavenly Kingdom?
- Lots of Messianic figures in Roman Judaism
  - Each claimed different answers to the above questions

Jesus

- An historical figure about whom we know very little for certain
  - The earliest account of his life and death comes from the Gospel of Mark, written c. 70
  - Mentioned in earlier Roman sources
  - Central to the Epistles of Paul (written c. 45-60), which are the earliest texts of the New Testament, but which are generally not concerned with recording biographical information about Jesus
• Born c. 6-4 BCE, probably 4 BCE
• Executed c. 30 CE
• A “carpenter”, meaning a member of any one of a number of building trades
• He was certainly learned and brilliant; he may have been married (as any Jewish man his age would have been)
• A follower of John, a charismatic desert preacher executed c. 25 CE (the Baptist)
• After John’s execution, Jesus embarked on a ministry of roughly three years, which culminated in his execution

Gospel Portraits of Jesus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark's Jesus</th>
<th>Matthew's Jesus</th>
<th>Luke's Jesus</th>
<th>John's Jesus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>healer &amp; exorcist</td>
<td>prophet of nation</td>
<td>prophet of God's compass &amp; mercy</td>
<td>pre-existent Word, eternal Wisdom &amp; revelation of God’s glory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faithful &amp; suffering servant</td>
<td>new Moses, new lawgiver</td>
<td>person of prayer &amp; anointed by God’s Spirit</td>
<td>the One Who is</td>
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“Lost Tomb” of Jesus?

• 6 ossuaries discovered in Jerusalem ca. 1981
• Inscriptions include “Jesus”, “Mary”, “Joseph”
  • See NYT story
Jesus’ ministry

A Jewish critique of contemporary Judaism

• Following the Law is not enough
  – Threat to those authorities who regulated the Law
• Love God and love one’s fellow man
• Lead an ethical, moral life that includes charity, brotherly love, humility
• The Messiah is not a general or a politician; and liberation is not military or political, but spiritual

A social revolutionary?

• Jesus’ messages appealed most strongly to those in Judean society who were outcasts
  – Proposed that an individual’s worth was not a matter of social position, political power, or wealth, but of spiritual life
  – Beggars, prostitutes (and women in general), tax collectors, “lepers”, and others at the margins of society
    • “healing” perhaps a matter of accepting the socially “diseased”?
  – Message very threatening to the political and religious elites in Judean society

Jesus’ trial and execution

• Roman authorities did not tolerate troublemakers in Jerusalem during holidays
  – Jesus was a “troublemaker” in Jerusalem during Passover
• Jewish authorities were threatened by Jesus’ social and religious messages
• Probably arrested as a consequence of an understanding between Jewish and Roman authorities
• Execution carried out under Roman authority according to Roman traditions and law
• Traditionally, crucifixion included leaving the body to decay on the cross
Historically, Jesus was not unique

- There were many charismatic preachers and healers in first-century Judea, all of whom had followers devoted to them
  - “healing”, and the performance of other miracles, was not a particularly unusual occurrence either
- There were many Jewish “troublemakers” who were executed by Roman authorities

However, the Jesus movement was unique, because it survived his death

WHY??

Saul of Tarsus

- from Tarsus in Asia Minor (Turkey)
  - son of a tent maker
  - relatively well-to-do
  - Roman citizen
- a Hellenistic Jew
  - spoke, wrote in Greek
  - well-versed in Greek philosophy
- Employed by the Temple authorities to find and persecute followers of the Jesus movement
  - underwent a conversion experience during his activities, and became a follower of the Jesus movement (c. 35CE?)
Paul of Tarsus, c. 5 - 67

- Became an itinerant preacher of the Jesus movement
  - traveled throughout Asia Minor and Greece
  - would begin his preaching in the local Jewish synagogues; would continue in private homes
  - found many converts among the “God fearers” of Syria, Asia Minor, and later Greece

Paul’s mission

Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles

- Apostle: a teacher
- Gentile: a non-Jew

- To what degree did Paul “create” Christianity?
  - Paul was the only major apostle who did not know Jesus personally
  - Paul does not write about Jesus -- he writes about Christ
  - Paul’s letters -- his Epistles -- are the earliest documents in the New Testament
The appeal of the Church

- Rejected social differentiation in favor of spiritual qualities
  - attracted women, slaves, others outside the traditional social power structure
  - women and slaves controlled the education of the children
- Salvation based on the life of the spirit, not the life of the flesh
- had many of the same appeals as the mystery cults, but was based on an historical (rather than mythological) figure

Early Christian practice

- Baptism
  - the fundamental rite of passage
- the Eucharist
  - ritual meal commemorating Jesus' Last Supper
  - bread represented the body; wine represented the blood
  - eating together both solidified the community of the faithful, and symbolized the rejection of traditional social differentiation

Early Roman perceptions of the Church

- Suspicious because
  - met in secret
  - engaged in “cannibalism” (the Eucharist)
  - refused to acknowledge the Roman state gods, or the divinity of the Emperor
  - rejected the social hierarchies and conventions of Roman society
Religion in the Roman Empire (4 March 2002)

The Growing Christian Realm, 29-c. 500 C.E.