

THE RISE AND FALL OF CHRISTIANITY

A Concise Summary

Christianity is based on the existence, teachings and possible assertions of a person named Yeshua from Galilee who was born about 2025 years ago. His name was later Hellenized and Romanized, ending up as we know it today in English in the form of Jesus. Some historians dispute the existence of such an individual, while others suggest that he was in fact two persons rolled up into one in posthumous recollection. However, while historical certainty about him is not possible, most secular, as well as religious, historians do tend to accept that, on balance, he was an historical figure and not entirely a myth.

So, if one accepts the existence of Jesus, the questions are what kind of life did he have, what did he teach and did he claim or imply that he was the son of a god?

The outline of his life is that he was the offspring of a carpenter called Joseph whose wife was named Mary. He had siblings and may have been trained as a carpenter himself. In early adulthood, it appears that he became a peripatetic religious preacher, basing himself on the Judaical tradition. It is apparent that he eventually managed to get on the wrong side of the Jewish establishment and also came to be viewed by the Romans as a disruptive social influence. As a

result, he was subjected to a cruel execution by crucifixion.

The Gospels are the primary source for examining the life of Jesus. However, they are a hotch potch of writings by some not very educated devotees, several of whom lived well after the events concerned. Apart from reporting some of the biographical details referred to above, they describe a theology and ethics enunciated by Jesus and also claim that Jesus portrayed himself as and was in reality the son of a god, and, further, performed miracles.

The first question that comes to mind is: did he in fact so depict himself or was that idea subsequently attributed to him or a misinterpretation of what he said. In other words, did he make pronouncements of divinity or was he glorified by his followers afterwards? If he was simply just another preacher, then he was not all that unusual. On the other hand, if he gave it to believe that he was a god or part of a divinity, then he was clearly either a charlatan or mentally unbalanced with delusions of grandeur. In either of the latter respects, he would not be unique.

As for the miracles, they could either be imagined or misconstrued from actual events. For example, Lazarus might have

been in a catatonic state and came out of it in the presence of Jesus. More generally, one should appreciate that the Gospels were not the work of historians and were composed at times when the boundaries between dream and reality, wish and fact, myth and scholarship did not prevail. The Gospels may have been attempts at a genuine account of the life of Jesus, but they are ultimately no more to be relied on than the Greek myths.

The key doctrines put forward by Christianity concerning earth-bound phenomena are those of virgin birth, divine incarnation and bodily resurrection. Theologically, there is the notion of a godly trinity as well as versions of what Christians call heaven and hell, and so on. In these and its ethical teachings, there is nothing basically new in Christianity; it is in fact repackaged paganism.

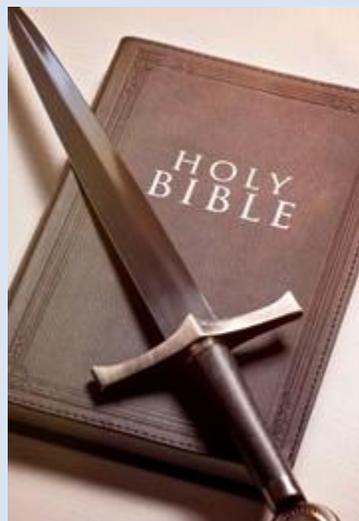
How then did this Palestinian cult, as distinct from the already widespread Stoicism or Zarathustrianism of the time come into prominence, initially in Western Asia, then in Europe and later throughout much of the world?

The breakthrough was in the 4th century CE when the Roman Emperor Constantine 'converted' to Christianity and it shortly after became the State religion. There is some doubt, however, as to whether Constantine was a true convert or an opportunist. Certain

suggestions about his life after 'conversion' do not tally with being an enthusiastic adherent of the true faith. There are allegations that he continued to harbour Mithraic beliefs and perhaps indulged in related acts of worship. If true, why then should he do what he did in relation to Christianity?

Perhaps, because Christianity had its obvious attractions for a Roman Emperor. One has only to think of injunctions such as "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" and "turn the other cheek" , at least when taken simplistically, to discern how that suited the imperial project very well. Religions generally serve the purpose of fostering compliance of the ruled in the face of the ruler. And Christianity, already making inroads among the masses in the empire, might have been viewed as decidedly useful towards that end.

The task was then to seek the dominance and dissemination of Christianity. There was to be no turning of the other cheek in that regard. Suppression within the empire of non-Christian religions and philosophies, and one of the greatest waves of intellectual destruction in the history of humanity proceeded. Not only art work, but books and documents were consigned to the flames. It has been estimated that up to 90% of classical



learning, from Greece and Rome in particular, thus perished, never to be recovered. Not inappropriately, the period ushered in by Christianity has been titled the Dark Ages. Beyond the boundaries of the empire, both during and after its reign, Christianity was advanced with the bible in one hand and the sword in the other.

Christianity was not to begin its long retreat until what are called the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, joined by the Scientific Revolution and, next the insights of evolution and, soon afterwards, the steadily unfolding comprehension of the cosmos. But well into the 20th century Christianity still endured, not only as an ally of conservatism, but as an accomplice of imperialism.

Although, Christianity was supposed to be the saviour of the human race, for all its associated political and military power, it never achieved more than a small, albeit not insignificant, presence on the globe. Today, out of approximately 7.5 billion people on the planet, 2 billion describe themselves as Christian, although that is probably far from an accurate measure of authentic belief and practice. Of interest to Ireland is the fact that about one billion world-wide designate themselves as Roman Catholic, in other words less than one-seventh of humanity. There is a lot of conversion to be done.

In Western Europe in particular, Christianity is in sharp decline and what is secular humanism, explicitly or implicitly, is growing gradually and, in some countries, is already predominant. In Ireland, a pertinent statistic was obtained from the referendum that opened the way to abortion on demand within a certain time limit. No issue could be more fundamental for a devout Catholic and yet only one-third of voters could be got to oppose liberalisation.

All this is not surprising. I have written elsewhere about the three essential conditions for the decline of religion: deepening education, basic economic security and the growth of a scientific mentality. Otherwise, Christianity especially is experiencing a revolt, against sexual repression in particular and a weltanschauung of guilt and misery. The totalitarian in the sky and his (not her, of course) vicarious totalitarians on earth are being overthrown. The boomerang is coming back: Christianity proclaimed that the truth shall set you free and, ironically, that is precisely what is happening.

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