

Every thing is full of God. Whatever men worship, it can be fairly called one and the same. We all look up to the same stars; the same heaven is above us all; the same universe surrounds every one of us. What does it matter by what system of knowledge each one of us seeks the truth? It is not by one single path that we attain to so great a secret.

—Symmachus, *Relationes* 3.5–10

The words of the Roman senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus quoted above were written to represent the view of a group of Roman aristocrats at the removal of the altar of Victory from the *Curia*, the Roman senate house, in the late fourth century C.E. The altar had been in the *Curia* since Augustus's victory over Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E. Its religious significance grew over centuries: it was the senators' central altar of worship, where they vowed allegiance to the emperor and offered prayers for the state's prosperity; and it was a symbol of Rome's imperial glory and the gods who secured that glory. When it was removed from the *Curia* under the emperor Gratian in 382 C.E., a delegation from the senate appealed to him for its restoration. Gratian, however,

under the influence of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, refused even to receive the senatorial delegation.

Yet, the position of Symmachus and the Roman senators was one of an old, established, and revered religious polytheism. In the ancient Mediterranean world, religion was a panoply of creeds, gods, goddesses, cults, and rituals that served different worshippers on different occasions. Indeed, Symmachus and his fellow Roman aristocrats of the fourth century, along with most non-Christians and non-Jews, held that a wise man might follow any number of private devotions in addition to the worship of the gods of the state and the emperor himself. They were willing to accept the Christian God into that pantheon; but the Christians could not agree to worship the gods of the state and the Roman emperor. According to the pagan view, it was only when the entire community properly worshipped the gods that the state could expect divine favor, called the *pax deorum*, or "peace of the gods." Thus, Christians risked inciting the anger of the gods against the Roman state by their stubborn refusal to sacrifice. This was the position of the emperors in the first through the early fourth centuries who insisted upon

general sacrifices to the gods by all citizens, and who called for the persecution of those who did not comply.

Early Christians believed exclusively in Jesus whom they considered the long-awaited Messiah, “anointed of God,” a Hebrew word translated into Greek as *Christos* and into English as “Christ.” For Christians, to participate in the public sacrifices demanded by emperor worship or by the state religion was apostasy. In his famous exchange of letters with the emperor Trajan, Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor of Bithynia, wondered whether he could punish the Christians for their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy, apart from any crimes they had committed. This fundamentally different view of religion—the one, of tolerance for a multitude of deities, and the other, a monotheistic and singular view of salvation through the worship of Jesus—fairly sets out the conflict between Christians and non-Christians.

This book treats the evolution of that conflict in five essays from the perspective of a classicist with particular scholarly interests in the topography of Rome during its third- and fourth-century transformation from a classical into a Christian society. Thus, these chapters are not studies one would find in the work of a theologian or a New Testament scholar, but of someone with a literary (Greek and Latin, but not Hebrew or Aramaic) and Roman bias. Chapter 1 is an historical overview of the Jewish background of Christianity as it expands from a mere footnote in the Roman writers of the first century C.E. to the widespread religion of the imperial court by the fourth century C.E.

Chapter 2 details Jewish-Christian encounters under the Herods, the dynasty of kings who ruled the Jewish state of Judea and the larger surrounding area of Palestine at the discretion of the Roman emperors. This essay includes a short history of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the Galilean Jew who led the splinter sect of Judaism that inspired the Christian movement. Chapter 3 examines Diocletian’s reforms, his persecution of Christians, and the Christian monotheism adopted by Constantine at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 C.E. Chapters 4 and 5 treat the church after Constantine’s “conversion,” when Christian emperors, popes, and pagan Roman senators debated the place of traditional religious practices in Rome. By the time the emperor Theodosius gave legal sanction to Christianity in 391 C.E., Rome was no longer the seat of the ancient imperial empire but the primate see of a new Christian empire.

Features and Illustrations

Throughout the book, the reader will find several features and illustrations that enrich the presentation of the origins of Christianity. These features include: a chronology of significant events which immediately follows this preface; illustrations and maps detailing significant locations and important sculpture, paintings, and other images in the early story of the tradition; textboxes titled *Personalities in Christianity* that provide brief descriptions of a number of important historical figures in

the Christian tradition, as well as boxes titled *From an Ancient Text* that excerpt foundational primary sources dealing with the early period of the religion. Additionally, a glossary of selected terms and an extensive bibliography, together with an index for easy reference to specific topics in the text, may be found at the conclusion of the book.

Companion Website:
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A companion website is offered to support the use of this book, providing additional resources for both instructors and students. These materials will assist teachers in planning and enhancing their courses, and students will find helpful materials to improve their study and comprehension of the subject.

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