

# Section 10 – Roman Christianity

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## Public Religion

The Romans had long known that entertaining the people through staggeringly extravagant spectacles, holidays and feast-days, was an effective way of maintaining civil order and the loyalty of the people. The object of the new religion was to include everyone and unite them. While the final canon, the ‘official’ collection of writings to be included in the New Testament of the Bible, had already been determined, this did not impede the adoption of procedures and practices which went beyond what was written.<sup>1</sup>

Since only the priestly hierarchy had access to the collected canon, and only they were allowed to interpret it, a completely new base of knowledge grew up: dogma. This was a means to apply the interpretations of the holy texts, arrived at by committees of priests and prelates, to a whole raft of very different cultures, in many languages, across the Empire. The people would know of the Bible only that which the priesthood told them. Thus, the new religion had enormous flexibility, and its appeal was very broad; and of course, should that have failed to persuade, there was always the ruthless power of the State to back it up.

With this system in place, there was no difficulty in modifying the essential core of Christian practice to accommodate local requirements. This was a masterful stroke, since it allowed Christianity to spread virtually unopposed throughout the Empire and far beyond, simply by assimilating local belief and practice as it went along.

Part of this process was to dress up the new religion with all the spectacle and entertainment that the Roman populace demanded. Festivals and feast days were imported from other cultures, and none were more important than those of the Goddess. Every major calendar event in Goddess culture was adopted directly into Catholicism.

The midwinter festival, already widely celebrated, became the official birthday of Christ, even though examination of the Biblical texts clearly shows that they claim he was born at Passover – as was appropriate for a Jewish Messiah. Easter, which is named in English after the Saxon derivative of Ishtar, is the day of Jesus’ resurrection – the day of the Sacred Marriage, when the Goddess, radiant in her blaze of divine light, brings the resurrected god to her bed to ‘plough her furrow’.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the canon would not be officially rubber-stamped for another thousand years!

All Saints Day, on November 1, was equally celebrated as a feast of the Goddess, the time when her consort, the harvest god, perished, to be born again on December 25 when the sun could be seen to rise in the sky once more.

There were, by Roman times, so many variants of Goddess culture that the celebrations proliferated. The night before All Saints Day, All Hallows E'en, or Halloween, is derived from Samhain, the night when it was believed by the Celts that the membrane between the Real and the Otherworld was so thin that the denizens of the Otherworld – the dead – would rise and walk amongst the living.<sup>2</sup>

May Day, originally the same as Easter, became a separate fertility festival. Within the Roman Catholic calendar, every day has a patron saint and to a large extent these were local deities adopted by the Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup>

Although many early Christians had been readers, most people in the Empire were illiterate. Only the educated patrician class could read, alongside scribes and other specialist slaves. Bibles, like all books, had to be hand-copied and were rare and precious. Books were of no use to most of the common people in the Empire. Others, like the Gauls, were suspicious of written culture. The new religion had to be spread not by books, but by priests who had studied the texts. This was not a problem. While the early Christians had decided to establish a fixed canon before Rome adopted the religion, it was never intended to be read by everyone. In fact, establishing a canon and outlawing the writing of competing texts was a way to keep biblical knowledge in the hands of the priests and prelates. Christian priests were already trained to interpret the Bible and contextualise it in terms that non-Christians would understand, in order to evangelise the faith.<sup>4</sup>

Revelation and interpretation were, as they remain, at the core of all religion. Oracles were consulted, auguries taken, and many other means of communing with the gods and spirits were employed, similar to those used by our early shamans entering the spirit-world of the Goddess. The biblical text was seen not only as a document of reference – by which the authorities could measure any piece of theology – but also as a document of inspiration. The priestly class took the texts of the New Testament and interpreted them for the faithful, as Christian preachers and priests still do.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Samhain' is pronounced 'SAOW-en', not 'Sam-hain'.

<sup>3</sup> The Catholic Church has been replacing these with human saints for nearly a thousand years, but many of the originals are still in place – Saint Bridget, for example, the Celtic Goddess Brighid or Bride.

<sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr, the Christian evangelist and apologist, often likened the stories in the Bible to Greek myths, in order to make them more widely acceptable.

<sup>5</sup> The actual books of the Bible have always needed contextualisation, because they describe a time and place that is totally unfamiliar to the audience.

Of the Spanish conversion of the Philippines, over a thousand years later, Charles Derbyshire wrote, in the introduction to his translation of *Noli me Tangere* by the Filipino hero and muse José Rizal,

‘no great persuasion was needed to turn a simple, imaginative, fatalistic people from a few vague animistic deities to the systematic iconology and the elaborate ritual of the Spanish Church. An obscure Bathala or a dim Malyari was easily superseded by or transformed into a clearly defined Diós, and in the case of any especially tenacious “demon,” he could without much difficulty be merged into a Christian saint or devil.’<sup>6</sup>

Few more succinct descriptions of the process by which Christianity was proselytised, and still is today, have been set to paper.

On the other hand, the gentle words of missionaries and the preparedness to accept local belief into the nascent religion were only two of the methods used to promulgate Christianity. As ever with patriarchal monotheisms, behind the velvet voice of persuasion was the iron fist of coercion through violence. Charles Derbyshire, again, gives us an insight to the methods used by the Roman state on reluctant populations, as the same means were used in the Philippines by the Spanish:

‘When any recalcitrants refused to accept the new order, or later showed an inclination to break away from it, the military forces, acting usually under secret directions from the padre, made raids in the disaffected parts with all the unpitying atrocity the Spanish soldiery were ever capable of displaying in their dealings with a weaker people. After sufficient punishment had been inflicted and a wholesome fear inspired, the padre very opportunely interfered in the natives’ behalf, by which means they were convinced that peace and security lay in submission to the authorities, especially to the curate of their town or district.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rizal, Dr José, tr. Derbyshire, C. *The Social Cancer: A Complete English Version of Noli Me Tangere*. Manila Philippine Education Company. 1909.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*