

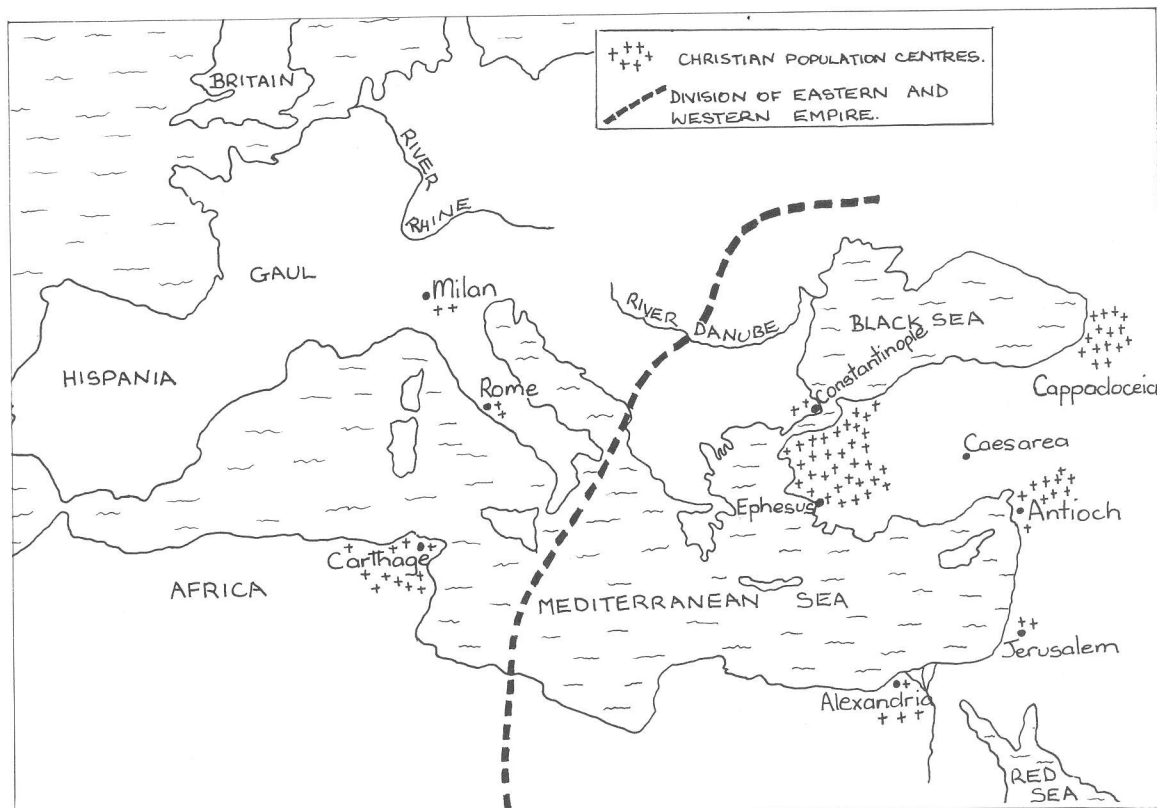
INFLUENCES ON EARLY CHRISTIANITY 30–400 C.E.

Introductory Exercise

All societies have their own own culture. People have different lifestyles according to where they live, what they do for a living or how old they are. Society and culture do not remain the same for all time. Many things bring about changes. Some changes can be

very dramatic and rapid, while others take a long time to occur.

Give some examples of changes in society in the last 10 years or so that you think are very important.



The Roman Empire at the end of the Fourth Century C.E.

SUMMARY

History is about how societies change and the influences that bring about these changes. This unit of work looks at what major influences brought about changes in Christianity in the first 300 years after the death of Jesus.

There were three major influences on the development of Christianity. Firstly, Judaism influenced the development of Christian ideas on justice, moral living and liturgy. Secondly, Greek thought and philosophy had a great effect on the writings about Jesus and the Incarnation. Thirdly, Roman organisation and culture influenced the development of a united, organised church.

INTRODUCTION

The early Christian converts in the Roman Empire came from different cultures and backgrounds. As Christians in a vast Empire, they were exposed to a variety of ideas and lifestyles. When they became Christians, many things in their lives changed; they also brought changes to Christianity.

For example, when Romans became Christians, they no longer went to see the gory spectacle of gladiators fighting or similar kinds of entertainment. Christians were taught that such practices were cruel, inhumane and immoral.

However, the new converts retained most of their own culture, and way of life.

What do you think might be some things that converts would not have changed in their lives?

THE INFLUENCE OF JUDAISM ON EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The first influences on early Christianity were the Jewish culture and religion.

The early Christian communities saw themselves as part of the Jewish faith. The Christians were one of the many groups or sects within Judaism. Even when the break with Jewish traditions was made definite at the Council of Jerusalem in 49 C.E., many

Christians, especially those who belonged to the community in Jerusalem, still maintained Jewish traditions and religious practices.

THE INFLUENCE OF JEWISH MORAL TEACHING

Christian moral teaching was mainly influenced by Jewish teachings. Jews were admired by all races throughout the Roman Empire for the care and concern they showed for their families and community. There was great respect for the individual; widows and orphans were cared for; children were taught in synagogue schools; there was a strong emphasis on family life and the sacredness of marriage. Christian communities followed the Jewish example.

Even though there were differences in what Christians and Jews believed and practised, there were similarities. For example, the Ten Commandments were central to the belief of Jews and Christians, as they still are today.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, AS ADAPTED FOR CATHOLIC CHRISTIANS IN A CATECHISM FROM THE 1950s

I am the Lord your God

- 1. Thou shalt not have strange gods before me.*
- 2. Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain.*
- 3. Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day.*
- 4. Honour thy father and thy mother.*
- 5. Thou shalt not kill.*
- 6. Thou shalt not commit adultery.*
- 7. Thou shalt not steal.*
- 8. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*
- 9. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife.*
- 10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's goods.*

The Ten Commandments:

The Law Given through Moses

The Lord spoke all these words. He said:

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

You shall have no gods except me.

You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or earth beneath or in the waters under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God and I punish the father’s fault in the sons, the grandsons, and the great-grandsons of those who hate me; but I show kindness to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not utter the name of the Lord your God to misuse it, for the Lord will not leave unpunished the man who utters his name to misuse it.

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath

for the Lord your God. You shall do no work that day, neither you nor your son nor your daughter nor your servants, men or women, nor your animals nor the stranger who lives with you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that these hold, but on the seventh day he rested; that is why the Lord has blessed the Sabbath day and made it sacred.

Honour your father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the Lord your God has given you.

You shall not kill.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his servant, man or woman, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is his.’

Compare these with the Ten Commandments that appeared in traditional Catholic Christian catechisms.

What changes have been made?

What do you think has been the change of emphasis if any?

Are there different interpretations of the meaning of particular Commandments?

And what do you think are the reasons for the changes?

Christians also adopted Jewish beliefs and practices that emphasised respect for all created things, and a concern about justice.

One obvious area of disagreement was the teaching about Jesus. Jews did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, though some Jewish religious leaders accepted Jesus as a prophet. And no Jews accepted the teaching that Jesus was the Son of God.

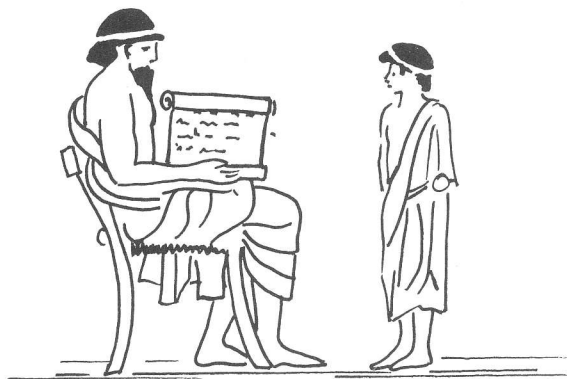
With the Council of Jerusalem in 49 C.E. formal links with Judaism generally ceased. However, the friction between the Jewish and Christian communities which had begun during the early years after the death of Jesus never really ended and it flared up at regular intervals throughout the early centuries of the Church.

Throughout history, the Jews have been a persecuted minority in Europe and in many other countries of the world. Can you give any reasons why this has been the case?

The Jewish religion also had an influence on the way that Christians worshipped when they were together, that is, their liturgical life – this is discussed in another unit of work.

THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK CULTURE ON WESTERN CIVILISATION

The Greeks of the Ancient World had a great influence on Western civilisation. From the seventh century before Christ to the fifth century C.E., the Greeks were leaders in the fields of art, architecture, poetry, history, science, mathematics, philosophy and literature.



A Greek tutor and student

When Greece was conquered by Rome in about 200 B.C.E., the culture of Greece was taken over by the Romans. Many Greek slaves were brought back to Rome as teachers. Thus began a long process of Greek influence or Hellenisation of the Roman Empire. (Hellenisation comes from Hellene, the word for Greek.) Although the Greeks were a conquered people and many were slaves, Greek scholars were highly respected. They taught in schools and were tutors in wealthy Roman households.

The Romans had their own culture and in time the two cultures (the Greek and the Roman) became blended. The term, *Greco-Roman* era is used to refer to this period of history.



A Greek student learning a musical instrument

THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK CULTURE ON EARLY CHRISTIANITY

“The world is full of wonderful things, but nothing is more wonderful than a human being.”

One of the most significant aspects of Greek thought which had an important influence on philosophies and religions was its concern for the value of people as intelligent beings. This idea was a fundamental part of Greek philosophy. It was also prominent in Greek art, forms of government, and even in the images of their gods. It is in the area of thought, or philosophy, that the Greek influence was most important in relation to Christianity.

Because the Greek philosophers had such respect for human nature, they thought a great deal about how to help people lead good, fulfilling lives. The philosophies of both **Plato** and **Aristotle** came to have important influences on Christian thinking.

ORGANISING WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT THE UNIVERSE: THE GREEK METHOD OF INQUIRY

Greek philosophers asked questions about all aspects of life, the nature of God and the universe. Their method of learning was the inquiry method – which could be called scientific or systematic even

though most ideas could not be tested by experiments. Their ideas were organised into systematic explanations of life. Christian teachers used their systems of thought to explain and organise Christian beliefs.

An example of this is the way Christian teachers made use of Plato's idea of the soul. Plato believed that people had a spiritual part to their nature as well as a physical part. The spiritual side was the more important part which would always be striving for good, but it was restricted by the physical side, which was more likely to draw a person to do evil.

CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS ADOPT THE GREEK METHOD OF INQUIRY AND IDEAS FROM GREEK PHILOSOPHY

The first Christian scholars to study and write about Christian beliefs were Greek. They are known as the Greek Fathers. (Father was a word used to describe a teacher and guide.) These scholars had been trained in Greek schools and academies to be scientific in their study of any topic. They developed a systematic explanation of the mysteries of Christianity.

Central to these studies were writings about the nature of Jesus, that is, is Jesus both a man and the son of God? Or is he just a special human and not the Son of God? As these questions became one of the main areas of controversy in the Church, the work done by the Greek fathers was of great importance.

ROMAN INFLUENCES ON EARLY CHRISTIANITY

In general, the Greeks were not good at organisation or at agreeing on a united system of government or laws. By contrast, the Romans were excellent organisers and law makers. (Roman law is still studied today in many universities.) Although the Romans admired the Greeks for their learning, they also thought they were a bit too argumentative and incapable of getting their act together when it came to organising anything.

The Romans managed a large Empire with great efficiency for many centuries. This helped its citizens

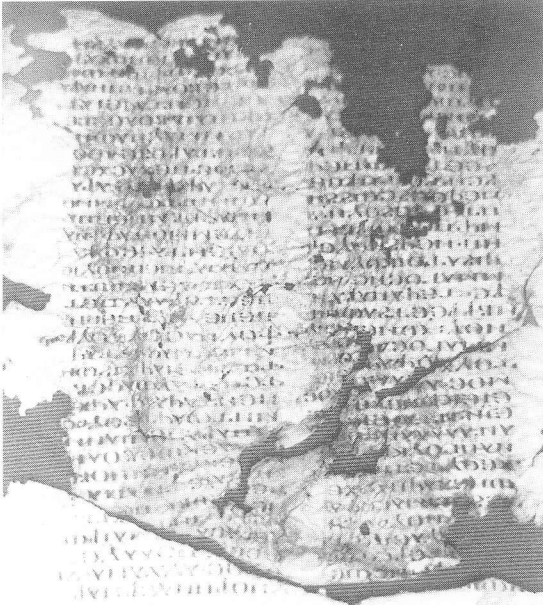
THESE ARE SOME OF THE THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS THAT WERE DEBATED BY THE EARLY SCHOLARS IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH:

1. Is Jesus really human and really God?
2. Is he the Son of God become man?
3. How can we understand the way in which Jesus can be truly God and truly man?
4. If Jesus was God, did he have divine knowledge of everything while he was on earth?

to prosper and travel in relative safety to all parts of the Roman world. The early Christians lived in this environment and would have been aware of the value and effectiveness of good government and organisation. So it is not surprising to see that they began to organise their Church along Roman lines. The good organisation of the Church was one of the factors that helped it grow in strength.

From the first to the third centuries, the Christian communities were faced with many difficulties. The Roman authorities were hostile to the Christian religion and Christians were subjected to some terrible persecutions.

The early Church was also threatened by disunity and arguments within its own ranks. In Corinth, disagreements about beliefs and about who was to be in charge, did a great deal of damage to the community. Some Christians came to see the value of having a strong, central governing authority. This was probably more the case in the Western part of the Empire which was, naturally enough, more influenced by Roman thought and culture. Therefore, one of the major developments of this period was the organisation of Church authority – in other words,



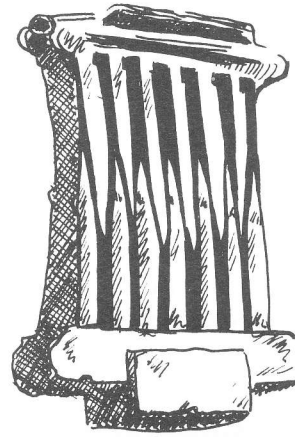
A fragment of parchment showing a Greek version of the New Testament copied in the third century. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, U.K.



Imperial weights from Roman times. Archaeological Museum, Nimes, France

who was in charge overall and who would make the important decisions.

In the years immediately after Jesus' death, the



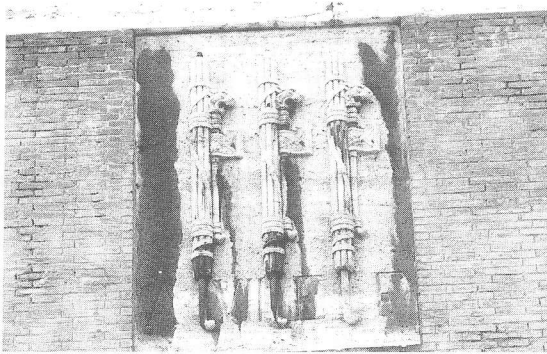
'Stele', (an upright slab, usually with some inscription), with symbols of Roman law and administration. Lapidary Museum, Avignon, France

Christians looked to Peter and the other Apostles in Jerusalem for guidance in matters of faith and about how Christians should live. But as Christianity spread, it became increasingly difficult to get such advice quickly.

It was important that the new Christian communities, in the first and second centuries, retain a uniformity of belief and behaviour. Also, there was a need to organise practical things like the daily running of the communities – who was to take care of orphans, teach converts, help the sick, etc. Consequently, an organisation developed in the Christian Church that was like the Roman administration. It had a hierarchical order – that is, one person in charge and elected people in other positions of authority with responsibility for organising particular jobs.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHURCH AUTHORITY

From the late first century onwards, each Christian community had a bishop as its leader. He was in charge of a certain district, much in the same way as the Roman government had governors in charge of municipalities and provinces.



'Fasces' – Bundles of rods and an axe bound together. Symbols of Roman government

As the Church grew in size and power, lower orders of clergy were established: priests administered the Sacraments and cared for the spiritual needs of the community; deacons were in charge of financial matters.

Women played an important role in the early Church, being in charge of communities and involved in instruction and preaching. In many communities women had an equal place with men. (This changed later. What brought about the change will be studied in another unit.)

The Hierarchy of Church Authority

The Pope: recognised as the main authority in the Western Christian Church since the fifth Century.

Metropolitan or Archbishop: the principal bishop of a province or region; usually the bishop of the capital of the region.

Priest: the ordained minister who celebrates the Eucharist and looks after the local community of Christians.

Deacon: an ordained minister, but not a priest, who could preach and teach in the local church and administer some sacraments and look after the organisation of the local Church.



Part of the ruins of the Roman forum with a Christian church built on, or over the site

Why do you think Christians would have built a church on such a site?

THE ROLE OF BISHOPS

By the fourth century C.E., there were many Christian communities where the role of the bishop was to exercise authority and leadership so that all Christians held the same beliefs and followed the same religious practices. The bishops of particular provinces of the Empire met regularly to discuss Church matters, settle disputes and promote a sense of unity.

The bishop of the provincial capital of each region (like the capital of a state) was given the title of Metropolitan or Archbishop. Finally, in the fifth century, after much dispute, the bishop of Rome was made the head of the Western Church and was given the title of Pope. However, it was only in the Western part of the Empire that this authority was recognised. In the Eastern part, where the emperors from the time of Constantine had lived, the power of the Church was divided between the head of the Church in the capital, Constantinople, and the ruling Emperor.

The debate as to who was the supreme head of the

Church, the pope or the emperor in the East, went unresolved for many decades.



Ruins of a marble seat on which early Christian bishops had sat. Museum, St John Lateran Basilica, Rome

THE ROMAN INFLUENCE ON CHURCH LAWMAKING

Another way in which Roman culture influenced Christianity was in the area of lawmaking. There were Roman laws that concerned all aspects of life, from adoption, to signing contracts to allocating punishments for certain crimes.

While the Greeks excelled in philosophy, the Romans had developed a complex system of law which did much to ensure the smooth running of business and civil life. As the Christian Church developed its theology (system of beliefs), the Roman example of codifying laws (putting them into a system) was used by theologians to write down Christian beliefs. In this way, teachings or doctrines could be referred to when converts were being taught and when any misunderstandings or false teachings were to be discussed or set right.

The following are some brief summaries of the teachings of Greek philosophers.

ARISTOTLE (384-322 B.C.E.) (BEFORE THE CHRISTIAN ERA)

In his writings on ethics, Aristotle taught that human good was the same for the individual as for the state. He taught that people should strive for the good which was always fluctuating between two extremes – either too much or too little. The good was determined in each individual case by the judgment of a prudent person. To be prudent, an individual needed the moral virtues, the three basic virtues being temperance, fortitude and justice. Contemplation, the highest human activity, becomes possible if an individual has acquired human virtues.

EPICURUS (341-271 B.C.E.)

The school of thought which grew up around Epicurus was like a religious community for spreading his writings. Epicurean philosophy rejected superstitions and criticised the ways in which people thought about gods in human terms. The ethics of Epicurus saw philosophy as the health of the human soul which should exclude false opinions about gods, destiny and death. His philosophy took account of human desire and regarded pleasure as the beginning and end of a happy life. However, some excessive pleasures were rejected because of the evils they caused. Pleasures were to be sought in moderation. The philosophy of Epicurus has been said to be utilitarian – that is, practical – and hedonistic – concerned with human pleasure.

STOICISM

Stoicism was a Greek school of philosophy named after the 'stoa' or painted colonnade where Zeno, the first Stoic philosopher (366–264 B.C.E.), taught in Athens. This philosophy stressed the seriousness of life and the individual in opposition to the emphasis on ideas and universal beliefs in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Stoic philosophy gave the most important place to practical matters and to the ideal of mental tranquillity. It was also materialistic, that is, concerned with things.

PLATO (428–348 B.C.E.)

For Plato, the spirit was the most important part of a human being, and it was held back by the material side of human nature. Plato's idea of humans having a soul and body was to have a significant influence on Christian thinking.

SOCRATES (469–399 B.C.E.)

Socrates was a prominent Greek philosopher who considered that knowledge was virtue. Ignorance was the sole evil. Socrates was well known for his teaching method of asking questions. The style of questioning developed by Socrates as a teaching method became known as the Socratic method. He was a religious person who saw limits to human reason and the need to consult the gods in matters beyond the grasp of people.

GLOSSARY

Prohibition: *the forbidding of particular practices.*

Greco-Roman Era: *the period in history during which Greek and Roman cultures were blended. Greco-Roman culture was*

typical of the Roman Empire in the early centuries C.E.

Hellenisation: *the Greek influence on a culture; from the word Hellene meaning Greek.*

Philosophy: *systematic thought about the nature of reality and the meaning of human life.*

Theology: *systematic organisation and reflection on Christian beliefs.*

Church Fathers: *the important Christian Church scholars in the early centuries C.E. who studied and wrote about Christian theology and Christian way of life. The term Father was used to mean teacher and guide.*

Hierarchical: *from the word hierarchy, a system of authority with the person in charge at the top of the system with others arranged in a decreasing order of authority.*

Municipality: *a town or city.*

Province: *a larger region or district of a country.*

Review Questions

1. In what way/s did the Jewish religion influence Christianity?
2. In what way/s did Greek culture influence Christianity?
3. In what way/s did Roman culture influence Christianity?
4. The Greeks and Romans believed in many gods. Why do you think the idea of One God may have appealed to many non-Jews?
5. Why were many of the early Christian writings in Greek?
6. How did the Roman system of authority influence the development of the early Christian Church?

ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a timeline, or graph, charting the different influences on Christianity to about 300 C.E.

2. Prepare a wall chart that shows how Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures influenced Christianity.

3. Read Acts, ch. 17, to see how St Paul spoke to educated Greeks about Jesus.

4. In the same chapter of Acts, Paul spoke to the Jewish people. In what way was his approach to the Jews different from his approach to the Greeks?

5. Why do you think Paul used different approaches?