

## Uprising

Notes from 7/7/02

The session started with a brief review/summary of the previous session pointing out that the bulk of the previous session had focus on answering questions that had been raised before. Questions that had to do with three topics, the jubilee platform and its role in Jesus' movement, the event and meaning of the resurrection, and the role of women in the early church.

After that we move on the question regarding the Christianization of the Roman Empire. The guiding question for the entire session is more or less this: how can an outlaw and persecuted movement in the course of less than 300 years become the paradigm of the empire?

Jim started out by outlining different views as to how this came to be:  
One view is that there was and is a divine power guiding individuals and events that worked to establish Christianity with a long term plan for a divine order of things. The power guiding the establishment of Christianity as the dominant way of life is powerful and potentially violent, which will not be denied. This particular view has served Christian orthodoxy well over the centuries, since they are only the instruments the divine power leading the world to that perfect order.

Another view of how the Christianization of the Roman Empire came to be is that Christian principles and way of life set their followers apart from the pagan world and that the contrasts led to mass conversions of pagans at different times. Both of these views are theological positions and are the basis on which ecclesiastic authorities developed their exclusionary guidelines for eligibility to the divine order.

Jim view is that there are no rules for divine order coming from a divine source. Rather, the Christianization of the roman empire can be understood as the Romanization of the Christians, because, according to Jim, it is the ideas and cultural practices of the dominant culture that survive and eventually absorb or erase the ideas and movements outside of the main stream.

Jim pointed out that the assumed exponential growth of Christianity within the empire may not have been necessary to reach the levels that it had by the year 311. Sociologist Rodney Starck has challenged this view point that only divine intervention could explain the growth of Christianity in the first 300 years. Starck argues that given the number of Christians in the year 40 which might have been around 1000 growing at 3.5 to 4% would be enough to reach the 7.5 million Christian estimated to exist by the year 300. Thus, the growth that Christianity experience, particularly in the 50 years prior to Constantine coming to power could have been seen as dramatic, but not unexpected. Furthermore, it is likely that Christians adopted some of the methods of the dominant culture to survive and grow. The work of Christian apologists could be seen as one way by which Christianity worked to broaden its appeal to the pagan intellectuals by attempting to demonstrate the compatibility of Christian beliefs and principles with

philosophical ideals of classical Greece and Roman thought. Another way that influence of the dominant culture can be seen in the growth of Christianity is the structure that the growing church developed a governing structure that closely paralleled the organization of the Roman society. Christian apologists moved from having discussion meetings at private homes to the venues that were popular and attractive to the elite class of communities once again making their message not only compatible, but available to large groups of people.

There are two methods of doing theology

Kataphatic=reflective process that uses logical concepts to illustrate and demonstrate ideas.

Apophatic=engaged-active participant in relation with God?

Liberation theology has made an important contribution by pointing out that there are two acts to theology which together constitute a praxis. Most orthodox theology is seen as primarily engaging in the second act, theology which is reflection, without engaging in any action which constitutes the first act, engagement.

Christian apologists were kataphatics doing second act theology. As their sessions in theaters became popular, influential Romans moved to endorse and promote these events which likely were the major instruments for converting the ruling class.

The majority of the population of the Roman Empire (99%) could be considered underclass. The likely conversion of the underclass to Christianity was most likely via contact with engaging theologians who established alternative communities and could serve as refuges to many people whose existence within the empire could be best described as marginal (slaves, colonized people of various origins and the many who could not keep up with lenders or tax collections). This is particularly apparent when looking at the map of the empire and where the growth of Christian conversion was stronger. The margins of the empire, particularly the western and northwestern frontiers, were considered open territories at the time. Migration was encouraged to those regions and new population to those areas could function with limited supervision from the empire which made it attractive to Christians and other marginalized people. This is likely, but we don't know much about their engaging activities, other than that when Constantine emerged from the western part of the empire he recognized the importance and presence of Christianity in those parts and saw it as a good (useable) thing. By the time Constantine emerged, Christians were in every part of the empire, and Jim supposes that he recognizes that they were, by that time, compatible with empire building and managing.

The question about the timing of Constantine's conversion continues to be subject to polemic, at the end we have to look at the information available and decide. Obviously if we believe in divine intervention we would go that route, for atheist Christians there is limited historical data to inform a decision.