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8. Jerusalem: Summary

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8. Jerusalem: Summary

Abstract

In this section an attempt has been made to sketch some of the most important developments of the first five hundred years of Christian history. By the year 500 the Church had been for more than a century the only legal religious institution in what remained of the Western Roman Empire, whose subjects were thus, nominally at least, Christians. The Church was an essentially new institution in the Mediterranean World, one with which no previous tribe, polis, nation, or empire had had to come to terms. Because of the position which it enjoyed, the Church had called into existence a new problem, one which persists to this day in Western Civilization: the problem of church and state. From the Roman Empire the Western Church had borrowed the model for what was a large and effective organization, which had in the bishop a figure of great influence, both civil and religious, both real and potential; and in the bishop of Rome one whose claims to head the entire Church had already been advanced and in many ways supported. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, gospels, Jesus, New Testament, Rome, Greece, Judaism, Christians, Pax Romana

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | Cultural History | History | History of Christianity | Jewish Studies | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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8. Summary

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By the year 500 the great early period of theological formulation -- an effort to interpret the Church to the world and the world to the Church -- had just about come to an end. Distilled into the creeds was a set of orthodox beliefs -- a party line, so to speak -- the result of a sustained and intense intellectual effort that had produced an enormous body of literature. "This is the Catholic Faith," said the Athanasian Creed, "which except a man believe faithfully, he can not be saved." Dogmatic assertions such as this, made by men whose motives cannot be questioned, help to explain the existence of another problem essentially new to the Mediterranean world and one which is not entirely absent from contemporary Western Civilization: the problem of heresy.

The cities of "Athens" and "Rome" as they have been used in this chapter designate civilizations of which these cities were significant centers. The same is not true of Jerusalem. Christianity was a religious faith which, its proponents said, was not irrevocably committed to any specific civilization. This attitude is related to a built-in tension that is characteristic of Christianity, arising from the Christian's involvement in this world and the next world or, as Augustine put it, from involvement in two cities, the earthly and the heavenly. This tension led some men to shun the world as much as possible by withdrawing into monasteries to a life of meditation and prayer. Significantly, such withdrawal was the limit for them, because suicide, permissible from the Stoic point of view, was a sin for the Christian. But this same tension produced activity of a different kind in other men, so that by the year 500 no institution in the Western Roman World possessed the vitality and zeal displayed by the Christian Church.

During the first five centuries of its existence, the relationship of the Christian Church with the Roman World had been one of mutual interaction. Perhaps the most distinctive Christian doctrine applicable in society was love, held to be a reflection of the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ, the very antithesis of the pride of Adam. But this love had to be interpreted and implemented. The interpretation and implementation did not always produce something radically different socially from what had preceded it. The Church did not succeed in abolishing slavery; it did not try. Its influence was more often felt in the counsel to owners to treat their slaves fairly. The Church did not succeed in abolishing war; its effort, particularly after the third century, was felt in the direction of trying to limit armed conflict to "just wars." Perhaps the outstanding area of the Church's influence at this time was in providing help for the needy and unfortunate members of society, whom previous cultures had largely passed by. But the world also had its impact on the Church. As we have already seen, from the Hebrews the Church had borrowed many of the attributes of its God, from the Romans the model for its organization, and from the Greeks the tool by which it fashioned a theology. It borrowed more. Over against a rigidity in what it regarded as fundamentals must be considered the Church's capacity to adapt itself to conditions that it could not or did not want to change. As we shall see in a later chapter, this flexibility meant the incorporation into Christian thought and practice of things that were not specifically Christian but which undoubtedly helped the Church in its mission.

Finally, it should be noted that among the paradoxes which the Christian faith seemed to present there was one which was particularly applicable to the material of this chapter. While the devout Christian felt the tension arising from his involvement in the earthly city and the heavenly city, he also felt that in Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of God, other tensions of long standing had been removed. For Christ, he believed, had bridged the gap between the ideal and the material which was

characteristic of Greek thought, the gap between the eternal law and the human law which was characteristic of Roman thought, and the gap between the past and the future which was characteristic of Hebrew thought.