

Western Philosophy in Medieval Europe

Part I – To The ‘Fall’ of Rome

When we try to understand Western Medieval thought, we have to take into account a number of seemingly disparate influences: Roman Politics, Christianity, and Classical Greek Philosophy.

To begin with we should review some ideas about Christianity. First contrary to what you might expect, textual sources regarding Christianity dating from its early years are plentiful. In fact comparatively speaking early Christianity was quite literate. It was once thought that most Christian texts such as the Gospels were composed somewhere in the fourth century, since these were the earliest surviving manuscripts. However, recent scholarship and archeology have shown that many of the early writings that we now possess have a much earlier date of composition. There is no end to the scholarly controversy regarding the composition of the Gospels, but most scholars date the composition of the Gospels to somewhere in the first century. Hence we may view the Gospels and other early Christian writings as closely related to the beginnings of Christianity, remembering the proviso that they are not meant to be history in our sense of the word but are meant to be faith documents that are founded on actual events. Probably the Gospels were composed as what we might call “faith biographies” of Jesus. In other words the writers were trying to tell this incredible yet (certainly in their minds) true story as best they could. The actual historical accuracy is an issue well behind the scope of this introduction.

Christianity began as an obscure Jewish sect but rapidly spread throughout the Roman world. This transition as we might expect was not completely smooth. In 64 A.D. Christianity was outlawed by the Emperor Nero. Whether this was because Christians started a fire that burned much of Rome causing immense loss of life and loss of property is an open question. True or not the story is probably an accurate description of the overall effect of Christianity on Rome. Certainly there were a series of trials and controversies swirling about other problems for the new religion. There was opposition to Christianity among its first missionary targets who were primarily Jews. The source of this opposition is controversial. Initially Christianity was seen as a Jewish reform movement, one of many that were active during the first century. It was called the New Way or the Way and seemed to stress an adherence to a simple and direct interpretation of the law (you really do have to love your neighbors, even if you don’t particularly like them), but not a conservative Talmudic adherence that was favored by the Pharisees. Neither did the new Christians favor a liberal interpretation of Scripture such as was preached by the Sadducees who were heavily influenced by Greek thought. It seems as if the early Jews were amenable to considering Christianity or Jesus’ teachings as a reform movement but this interest waned as Christianity started to appeal to non-Jews thanks to the insistence of St. Paul. Apparently Paul, like many Christians of the day, expected Jesus to return sooner rather than later, so therefore rapid conversion of as many people as possible was necessary. Apparently Paul was able to convince the other apostles that only a break with Rabbinic or Talmudic Judaism could accomplish this feat in the time required.

Rejection by the Jews and being officially outlawed help to marginalize Christianity in the Roman Empire. We must also realize that Christianity in many ways did not fit the typical mold of religious belief at the time. Most religions of the day traded on some sort of exclusivity. Very often a religion or cult was open to only a certain class or people of the certain status in society-women were often excluded. Believers often had to go through trials, pass tests participate in secret rituals, or learn arcane knowledge in order to prove their worthiness and join the inner circle. Believers attained a privileged status in society gained through connections thanks to membership in the cult. In addition to spurious stories about Christianity being some sort of cannibal cult and several critiques by well-known philosophers and pagan theologians, Christianity’s universality conferred no special status on members, which certainly counted against it in the minds of the people of the day.

However Christianity had a few things going for it. For one thing the witness of the martyrs had to be seen as extraordinary. The word ‘martyr’ in Greek means witness. Although persecutions waxed and waned during the first 300 years of Christianity, all the horrible things that we read were done to the early Christian martyrs were accurate, not just propaganda. The burnings, crucifixions, feeding to wild animals and so forth were all real. Probably the most amazing thing to do with the martyrs was that martyrdom could be avoided if you publicly denounced your Christian affiliation when asked. In other words during a time of persecution if a Christian was

hauled into court here she could go free if they merely said that they were not a Christian. They then could go home and do whatever they wanted even continue to practice as long as they made that public statement. That so many did not publicly reject their Christianity is astonishing today and was probably equally astonishing to the people of the time. There seems to also have been a general tendency in the Empire towards the acceptance of more philosophical ideas about truth, reality, and how to live your life that was beginning to replace paganism. Also certain monotheistic ideas were beginning to take hold. When we talk about Monotheism here we should not ordinarily think of Jewish or Christian or Islamic monotheism. Rather people of the Empire were open to the idea that there may be a supreme deity that deserved all the attention and worship and that even if there were other pagan gods these were simply subordinates or helpers. It also is perhaps the case that more egalitarian ideas that were favored by Christianity were independently beginning to take hold. Direct political participation by citizens was no longer a bold Athenian experiment

Also we cannot forget the impact of philosophies such as Neoplatonism and Stoicism. The connection to Neoplatonism would be fully exploited by writers such as St. Augustine later on. Stoicism was prevalent in the Empire at this time, certainly among the intelligentsias who were usually very familiar with Greek philosophy and tended to speak Greek among themselves and use Latin for public or political occasions. Stoicism focuses on maintaining an inner calm and peacefulness, free from the passions, in the face of all the negativity that life can throw at you. Ultimately the Stoic is intent on maintain goodness and virtue regardless of all the bad things that are going to happen. Obviously this has something in common with Christianity, and the central message of Christian virtue can be understood in Stoic terms, although the Christian maintains his virtue because of the assurance of God's love and providence. The Stoic on the other hand is simply living in accord with his or her place in the natural world and choosing not to "swim upstream". Although Neoplatonism doesn't become an identifiable philosophical discipline until the appearance of Plotinus (205-270 A.D.), in the Empire there were many ideas and philosophers that could be considered forerunners of Neoplatonism, Cicero being an example of a Neoplatonic forerunner. These thinkers generally were conversant in Platonism and Aristotelianism, seeing an important blending of the two philosophies as necessary. They tended to ignore the cosmological, psychological, and metaphysical particulars that generated ancient controversies, and rather focused on the similarities particularly and ethics. The accepted ethical theory derived from both Plato and Aristotle is generally known as Eudaemonism. This idea focuses on the acquisition of virtue or psychological or spiritual excellence as a key to happiness. Of particular note for both Plato and Aristotle would be the focus on the soul as that which delineates the essence of the human being and the improvement of which leads to happiness and human excellence. A key feature of Platonism is the immortality of the soul and a focus on the Good as the highest form. Other features of Platonism are easily adaptable to Christianity and this relationship was exploited by many Christian theologians, with Augustine (354-430 A.D.) being of particular note. Overall it would seem that intellectually and philosophically the Empire was beginning to advance beyond paganism thanks to the influence of the Greeks and Christianity ultimately would be compatible with this advancement. It is important to remember that during this time religion was vitally important for most of the populace. There was a near universal belief in some sort of higher power. The worry was more which higher power and collection of rituals deserved our allegiance rather than whether God existed. Atheism as such was practically nonexistent. We can only speculate as to why this is the case.

Ultimately Christianity's universality probably had enormous appeal in the cosmopolitan Roman Empire. The rulers and emperors constantly looking for ways in which to unify the populace this is not to say Christianity was chosen as a unifying factor; it seems to be much more than that. But when you are looking to govern a huge territory anything that unifies is preferable to that which divides. We might speculate that foreign Empire to exist there needs to be common ground. Christianity was certainly able to provide that.

Finally we must admit that the Jesus narrative is obviously a compelling one. Clearly we have an account of someone who is morally and spiritually superior. Although we often find such a person difficult to emulate, we marvel at what he or she says and does. Jesus' actions and teachings and their implication for our own earthly and/or spiritual journey is at least something to think about. Although during its initial stages the Christian population of the Empire was probably not more than 10% and certainly attracted those marginalized by the larger society, it would be a mistake to think that the educated were not attracted to Christianity. The amount of writing that existed in the early church testifies to this fact. Ultimately Christianity would attract the highest levels of society including the Emperor.

As we mentioned during its first 300 years in the Roman Empire Christianity was outlawed and officially persecuted. Persecutions would wax and waned over that time sometimes becoming quite severe. Other times Christians were able to live openly and worship openly without too much bother. During the third century politically the Empire suffered a great deal from various civil wars and problems arising from questions of succession and rival claimants to the throne of the Emperor. Particularly difficult for Christianity was the reign of Diocletian who reigned

from 286 to 305. Apparently in order to impose uniformity and order on the Empire, Diocletian decided to stick with paganism, resulting in the ruthless persecution of Christianity. In order to effectively rule the Empire Diocletian created what was known as the tetrarchy – a system whereby he shared power with three others who were supposed to be equals but were in fact subordinates, or at least Diocletian was first among equals. Surprisingly Diocletian abdicated in 305, an action that eventually re-created familiar problems of Imperial succession. Through a series of political and military victories Constantine I became sole ruler of the Western Empire, particularly after finally defeating his closest rival Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. Initially Constantine shared power with the Eastern Emperor Licinius whom he deposed in 316, leaving Constantine sole ruler of a United Roman Empire. Other than uniting the Empire under one ruler for the first time 40 years Constantine's actions might have been unremarkable save for a glaring difference in religious persuasion. After his victory at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine openly professed his allegiance to Christianity. There is little doubt about the genuineness of Constantine's conversion. Whether it was a dream or a vision, Constantine was under the impression that allegiance to Christianity and the Christian God brought him victory. The story goes that prior to the battle at the Milvian Bridge Constantine ordered his legions to paint a Christian symbol on their shields. This symbol could have been the sign of the cross, but was more probably what is known as the Chi Rho (a Greek X with a Greek Rho over top of it). In pictures we see that the shields of Constantine's personal guard bear the Chi Ro symbol, and he marched under a flag, the labarum, bearing the same symbol. In 313 Constantine issued the Edict of Milan that essentially legalized Christianity. But in professing himself to be a Christian Constantine effectively changed the Roman world. The fortunes of Christianity virtually changed overnight. This fact was something of a two-edged sword for Christianity in that as the Roman Emperor Constantine often took a leading role in certain aspects of and questions concerning the faith. However his involvement was usually to the benefit of the Church, and he generally maintained a respectful distance where internal Church affairs were concerned. The Roman Empire and Christianity became intimately intertwined, again with both positive and negative consequences, as we shall see.

Another action of Constantine had a huge impact on the church. In 330 A.D. Constantine effectively moved the capital of the Roman Empire to what would now be called Constantinople: a city on the straights of the Bosphorus - the site of ancient Byzantium. From everyone's point of view this move made tremendous sense. While Rome was the traditional capital of the Roman Empire, it had fallen into decay during the last few centuries. Compared to the East, Western Europe was something of an intellectual and political backwater. Although we should not think of Rome as completely derelict, the arts and sciences flourished in the East in a way that could not be equaled in the West at the time. The result would ultimately be a huge power vacuum in Rome and in the West.

Initially Christianity was governed rather loosely. Apparently the early Christians lived in the manner of Jesus and the apostles, which meant they lived communally, donating their private property to the church as a whole. Again, the idea seems to have been that Jesus was going to return sooner rather than later. Hence the early Christians were waiting for the final judgment that was assumed to be imminent, a few years- five or 10 at the outside. Acting on instructions, the original apostles and disciples traveled to various parts of the Empire and even venturing east perhaps as far as India spreading the "good news". At every stop the disciples established small Christian communities that imitated the original Christian community in Jerusalem. Each Christian community would elect elders or presbyters (soon to be priests) and a leader-the Episcopus (soon to be the Bishop). Initially the leader was the founding disciple or apostle. However when the disciple or apostle moved on or perhaps passed away a new leader was elected. When this leader subsequently died a new leader was elected from among the faithful. Gradually the church became so large that a leader of the bishops was chosen known as the Patriarch. By the end of the second century there were five significant Patriarchates in the Empire an arrangement that came to be known as the Pentarchy. These five Patriarchates naturally grew out of the five most important urban areas in the Empire: Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople (after it became the Imperial capital in 330 A.D.), and Rome. Initially each of these patriarchs was considered equal. However the Patriarch of Rome fairly early on asserted his superiority over the other four. The argument rested on the authority of St. Peter as undisputed head of the early church, a fact that was clearly attested to in the Gospels and disputed by no one. Jesus declares that Simon's name is now Peter meaning rock and further states that upon this rock I will build my church and he further gives Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven-of course all very significant declarations and essential aspects of the papacy to this day. The important codicil to this office of St. Peter's was that St. Peter traveled to Rome and died there, martyred in the persecutions of Nero in 64 A.D. As one may expect while in Rome St. Peter became head of the Christian community in Rome thus making him Bishop of Rome in addition to the head of the church. It was therefore argued by the subsequent bishops of Rome that Peter held both offices: head of the church and Bishop of Rome and therefore his successors also held both offices. This argument was made very forcefully by the eloquent and powerful Pope Leo I who reigned from 441 to 461 and it gradually began to carry weight. Generally it was the patriarch of Constantinople who most strenuously objected to this claim. As we shall see, however, the other

Patriarchates ceased to become important after the Moslem expansion, and eventually the church would split into East and West leaving the Pope in charge of the Roman Catholic Church and ultimately the ruler of Western Europe. But that is the story for later on.

By the time of Pope Leo the Western Empire was already in disarray, thanks largely to a series of barbarian invasions. Large sections of what are now France and Spain, as well as North Africa were controlled by Visigoths and Vandals. We should of course note that barbarian did not by this time necessarily denote a port of uneducated thugs but basically non-Romans. Originally the term referred to any group not speaking Greek and made noises like “bar-bar”. In days past the barbarians consisted of the Germanic tribes that existed in northern Europe who were generally bent on invading certain areas of the Empire. The Roman legions had kept them at bay and under control for centuries. However since the third century it was increasingly the case that Rome thanks to its incredible size began relying on mercenaries often drawn from these same Germanic or Gothic tribes. Very often citizenship was the reward for successful service and so a greater and greater proportion of the Army was composed of barbarians creating something of an anomaly. The people that were supposed to be keeping the barbarians out were in fact themselves barbarians. And as had been the case for centuries members of the Army were inevitably promoted to government service. In fact there was little distinction between military and government service. Hence by the time of Pope Leo in the western half of the Roman Empire a number of leading figures and eventually de facto rulers were of barbarian descent, again usually Roman in every way but birth. In 476 the Imperial throne was occupied by the 10 year old Romulus Augustulus who was the puppet ruler for the German born Orestes, thus maintaining the fiction of a Roman Emperor.

In 476 the Gothic Odoacer apparently had enough of the polite fiction and responded by killing Orestes, deposing Romulus, and claiming the throne. This event marked the first time a non-Roman ruled the Empire in the West and so is traditionally referred to as the fall of the Roman Empire. We should note a couple of facts. First many are under the impression that the fall of Rome was some sort of cataclysmic event. However the vast majority of people would have been unaware that anything had taken place. For most people emperors were changed far more often than they changed their underwear, if they had any. As long as nothing changed in local administration, and it didn't, business carried on as usual. For another thing the Eastern Roman Empire was doing quite well and would survive until nearly 1400. So the “Fall of Rome” may be something of a misnomer. This is not to say that there were no significant changes involved in this latest iteration of change in Emperor. For one thing Odoacer did not claim the title Emperor but claim to rule as a vice Regent only, a de facto king. He sent the Imperial insignia to the Eastern Emperor Zeno and pointedly recognized him as the only true Emperor. Another peculiarity was that although Odoacer was a Christian he was an Arian Christian and therefore technically a heretic, and yes everyone took this very seriously.

Unfortunately what might've been benign for most Romans eventually became difficult because of Odoacer's reneging on his promise to maintain the status quo for the Romans particularly the aristocracy. Odoacer kept demanding more status, wealth and land for the German people, eventually causing him to be seen as a great deal of trouble by the Eastern Emperor Zeno. Zeno decided to come to terms with another equally troubling barbarian, Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, asking him to take his people into Italy and overthrow Odoacer, essentially taking his place. Zeno saw this move as preferable since Theodoric was well known to him and generally seen as more pliable and reliable than Odoacer. Theodoric invaded Italy with the whole of the Ostrogoths populace around 488 and by 491 had succeeded in only fighting Odoacer to a stalemate. To resolve the situation Theodoric and Odoacer agreed to share power. This arrangement lasted until 493 when at a banquet Theodoric killed Odoacer apparently by cutting him in two with the sword. Theodoric's reign lasted until his death in 526 and his power was generally secure and his rule peaceful. It was marred by either a supposed or actual plot to overthrow him by some Roman Senators; notable among them was the philosopher Boethius whom Theodoric had executed in either 524 or 525.

Ultimately Theodoric's death marked the beginning of the “Dark Ages”. This period in history gets a lot of bad press, but as with the fall of Rome nothing much occurred except the loss of a central administration of government. Most ordinary people went on with their lives as they had before, and the wealthy returned to their family farms and lands. It is true that the cities became depopulated and many public institutions no longer function, at least with the regularity and efficiency that existed previously. This would certainly include institutions of higher learning and those that supported the arts. However, as we shall see, the church was vibrant and growing in stature and more than up to the task of maintaining civilization.