The Development of Christianity

The prosperity and security of the Roman Empire rested on the peace of the gods and observance of proper rituals by state priests. This peace of the gods included peace among foreign gods, or gods and goddesses in the regions Rome conquered. As Rome conquered new lands, it was careful to allow continued worship of native deities, which were often gods of particular places who were manifest in local temples. Rome even adopted some of these foreign deities, often equating them with gods in its own pantheon, a process called syncretism. This process worked the other way, too. People in the provinces often equated gods and goddesses in the Roman pantheon, such as Jupiter, with one of their own. This blending of deities helped maintain peace and promote a sense of shared culture. However, worship of native gods in the provinces of the Roman Empire had to occur alongside worship of the emperor. The public nature of religion—parades on religious holidays, offerings, and sacrifices at temple sites—was to ensure protection and inspire the goodwill of the gods. Roman religion, however, did not aspire to teach moral lessons or console the faithful as they struggled through daily life. The desire for a more emotional experience led some to seek participation in cults that transcended a particular place and offered some relief from the trials of daily life and a sense of community through its teachings. Some of these cults revealed mysteries through an initiation process, promising a future life after death, or salvation. Many also included a founding myth of the rebirth of the deity.

It is in this broader context—one of the necessity of the goodwill and peace of the gods throughout the Roman Empire—in which Christianity arises. In a narrower context, Christianity develops as a sect of Judaism in Judea, which was a Roman province. During this time, the center of the movement surrounding Jesus of Nazareth, whose followers will eventually become known as Christians, was Jerusalem. This is where the holy man and teacher was put on trial and sentenced to death by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Converting first among fellow Jews, the leaders of the movement granted permission to Paul of Tarsus to preach the divinity of Jesus to non-Jews. Paul was a member of the Pharisee sect of Judaism, which had a legalistic character and maintained its own traditions beyond that of other Jews, and up to this time had been a persecutor of Jesus’ followers. On one of his travels to Damascus, he had a revelation in which God claimed Jesus as his son. From that point until his death in Rome in 62 or 64, Paul set out to preach, baptize, offer forgiveness for sins, and celebrate the Eucharist—a re-enactment of the Last Supper and a central component of Christian fellowship. As he made his way toward Spain, which he believed was to be his ultimate destination, he set up missionary churches. Sometimes, Paul wrote ahead to believers to announce his mission. Other times, the communities of new believers Paul left behind as he moved ahead wrote to him with questions concerning how the church was supposed to function, issues specific to a given community, and clarification of doctrine. These missionary churches would be charged with spreading and expanding Christianity after the year 66. In that year there was a Jewish revolt in Judea. The Romans responded by destroying the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and
laying waste to the city, effectively wiping out the Christian church in Jerusalem along with it.

Beyond their immediate followers, Christians tended to be unpopular among local populations. Not only was this new group resistant to traditional worship, but they also kept to themselves, meeting in secret and in homes, and they rebuffed attempts to discuss their religion with educated non-Christians. Within Judaism, radicals were disappointed that the kingdom Jesus spoke of was not one to be seen on earth and conservatives saw Jesus as another false messiah undermining traditional Jewish religion. How, then, did Christians overcome suspicion and criticism to emerge as the official religion of the Roman Empire? Early in the second century, Christians had a collection of texts around which they organized their belief, or the New Testament. The “good news” of the texts comprising the New Testament, written thirty to sixty years after the death of Jesus, spread along Roman roads. This was also the period in which educated Christians began to address the opposition by discussing and defending the religion. Those who took up the defense of Christianity as a religion are known as Apologists. Using their knowledge and study of philosophy, figures such as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) showed that Christianity was compatible with classical culture and philosophy.

As Christians defended the precepts of their religion, they started to organize themselves. It was also during this time that the religion began attracting more members from the upper classes, giving it increased political importance. Christians established a hierarchy with priests, deacons, and bishops, the latter of whom were understood as successors to the original apostles. Centralized organization became even more important when Christians faced more than verbal or philosophical opposition. In the first two centuries of their existence, persecution of Christians was sporadic and localized. There were times, however, when it was systemic. Emperor Diocletian initiated the last systemic persecution of Christians during his reorganization of the empire following the period referred to as the Third Century Crisis. Diocletian targeted religious groups refusing to participate in the worship of state gods and the imperial cult, which included Christianity, as undermining the security of the state. Members of these religions were, in effect, committing treason. Thus, being a Christian during the time of Diocletian became a capital crime. Many of the martyrs in the Christian tradition come from this time period. The stories of those who were put to death, along the stories of those who perished from earlier instances of persecution, served as inspirational literature for the faithful. Moreover, the tales of staunch conviction in the face of death won many new converts.

The real change that propelled Christianity into the legal and cultural norm was the patronage and eventual conversion of Emperor Constantine (305-337) to the faith. According to the bishop Eusebius, in his battles to gain sole authority of the Roman Empire, Constantine had a vision the night before he battled Maxentius at Milvian Bridge in 312. The vision revealed the Greek chi rho iota, which symbolized the deified Jesus, or Christ, in Christianity. The voice in Constantine’s vision told him to fight under that symbol and victory would be his. Obeying the vision, Constantine had his soldiers
paint the symbol on their shields. At the end of the battle, Constantine had defeated the last enemy standing in his way on the path to sole imperial authority in Rome. In the wake of this victory, Constantine issued a general religious tolerance. In 313, he promulgated the Edict of Milan, which reversed the criminality of Christianity imposed by Diocletian. He also granted special privileges to Christian churches. The clergy, or church officials, were exempt from taxation, Christian churches were granted rights of sanctuary, and he sponsored the construction of new churches. Under these conditions, the hierarchy of the Christian church came to mimic the organization of civil government. For example, bishoprics, or the area under the supervision of a bishop, were aligned with civil demarcations of cities. By the fourth century, the bishops in a given province came under the direction and supervision of a new office: the archbishop.

In acting as the Christian church’s patron, Constantine had a vested interest in quelling any disagreements and divisions among the church leadership. The biggest division among the leadership at this time concerned something at the very heart of the religion: the divinity of Jesus. Followers of a view promoted by a priest in Alexandria, Arius, maintained that Jesus, because he took human form and because he was designated as the son, had not existed for all eternity. Proponents of this Unitarian view argued that a hierarchy still existed, with the father being higher than the son, and that only God was eternal. Followers of the opposing view, the view through which Constantine understood the faith, maintained a Trinitarian view in which there are three beings—the father, son, and holy spirit—in one person. This split came to the forefront during the election of bishops, which at times produced uprisings. Constantine’s response to this situation was to call the bishops to meet at Nicaea in the year 325 to settle the matter of the nature of God. The Trinitarian view, as expressed in the Nicaean Creed, won out.

The bishop Eusebius tells us that Constantine was baptized in the Christian faith on his deathbed. With the exception of the emperor Julian (361-363), known in Christian tradition as Julian the Apostate because he tried to institute a return to earlier Roman religion, every emperor after Constantine was a Christian. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Theodosius (379-395) when he enacted a law forbidding the practice of old cults.