RISE OF CHRIST-INSANITY

The rise of Christianity as the dominant religion of post-Roman Europe played a major role in shaping the course of history, not only on that continent but also in all parts of the world to which European people spread. The story of the origins of this remarkable religion—and its influence on the course of civilization—therefore deserves a full examination.

Rome’s Pontifex Maximus—an Important Position

Religion in pre-Christian Roman times was marked by diversity. There was never really a single theme in the worship of any particular god or set of gods, and it remained very much a haphazard collection of local beliefs, varying greatly from region to region.

It was only after the time of the emperor Octavian Augustus that any formalization of religious beliefs came into being. After Octavian, all the Roman emperors were known by the title of PontifexMaximus or “Greatest Pontiff.”

The idea of this title was that the emperor would be the formal head of whatever particular cult happened to be the most popular at that time in the empire. This was not limited to a single religion—it could also be any number of beliefs which were in existence simultaneously. The Pontifex Maximus position was the Romans’ attempt to try and create some sort of religious unity, although all cults were accorded equal status.

AUGUSTUS WEARING ROBES OF OFFICE OF PONTIFEX MAXIMUS

A statue from circa 20 BC shows Octavian Augustus wearing the robes of office of Pontifex Maximus (“Greatest Pontiff”), the high priest of the ancient Roman College of Pontiffs. A religious office under the early Roman Republic, it was later absorbed into the imperial office. In an attempt to provide some sort of cultural unity, the emperor became chief priest of all the religions in Rome. The religion followed personally by the emperor came to be regarded as the most desirable among the citizens, and this played a major role in helping to popularize Christianity after theemperor Constantine converted to that faith.

The position of the emperor as chief priest of what was deemed to be the unofficial state religion (or religions) was to have major consequences. Very often, a cult either gained or lost popularity solely because of the emperor’s interest in it.

One of the more obvious examples occurred when the Macedonian queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, visited Rome. The presence of somebody thought to be an Egyptian queen (she was, of course, not of Egyptian stock but actually Macedonian) sparked off a major revival in the ancient Egyptian cult of Isis, which eventually died out once again.

Christianity Originates in the Middle East

Before it came to dominance, Christianity was merely one more of these numerous cults, and, like many of its competitors, originated in the Middle Eastern reaches of the empire, in the Roman provinceofJudea (also known as Palestine).

Following the conquests of Alexander the Great, Palestine had been ruled intermittently by either the Ptolemies or the Seleucids, both descendants of Alexander’s generals of the same name. It was while under the rule of the Seleucids that the great temple in Jerusalem was built as a center for the Jewish religion, a surviving wall of which is today known as the Wailing Wall.

The Semitic-speaking peoples living in Palestine were known as Jews, a tribe which had been in existence for many centuries prior to this. What set the Jews apart from their neighbors was their religion, which, in contrast to their neighbors, was monotheistic. Its one god, Jahweh or Jehovah, was, and still is, central to the Jewish religion, although monotheism originated with the ancient Egyptian pharaohAkhenaton. Other religions all had a pantheon of gods, each looking after a particular aspect of life on earth and in the beyond.

The Jewish Rebellion against Seleucid Rule 168 BC

Seleucid rule in Palestine caused many Jews to take on the ways and even the Greek language of their rulers. This led them into conflict with the more nationalistic Jews, and a minor skirmish broke out between these two groups in 168 BC.

The fighting provoked the ruling Seleucids into trying to stamp out the Jewish religion. Among their measures, they ordered the Jewish temple in Jerusalem to be stripped of its Judaic artifacts and dedicated to the worship of the Greek god Zeus.

The Jews rebelled at this order, and after a short military conflict, were able to exact partial independence from the Seleucids in 142 BC, and full independence in 129 BC. The leader of the Jewish rebels was one Judas Maccabeus, and he became the first Jewish king in Palestine, creating the Maccabean dynasty which lasted until 64 BC.

CITY OF CAESAREA BUILT BY HEROD TO HONOR ROMANS

The extent of Roman power in Palestine is illustrated in the ruins of the city of Caesarea Palaestina, situated in northern Israel on the Mediterranean coast. Built on the ruins of an earlier settlement by the Jewish King Herod to honor the Roman emperor around 25 BC, the city contained a deep sea harbor, markets, wide roads, baths, temples honoring Augustus, and imposing public buildings including an amphitheater. Every five years the city hosted major sports competitions, gladiator games, and theatrical productions. The theater was the first of its kind in Palestine, and was maintained throughout the Roman and much of the Byzantine eras. It had a seating capacity of around four thousand and is used to this day.

Romans Invited into Palestine 64 BC

Independence in Judea did not bring stability, and the Jewish state was continually wracked by internal dissent and rebellion. In the midst of one of the civil wars, a group of Jews appealed for help from the Roman general Pompey, whose army was completing the conquest of Turkey and Syria at the time. He agreed to help, and Palestine was occupied as a Roman protectorate in 64 BC.

True to their long established practice, the Romans immediately began Romanizing the Jews and recruiting locals to run the province. In this way, the Roman senate appointed the Jew, Herod as kingofJudea in 37 BC. After his death in 4 BC, Judea was divided up into smaller units, most of which were ruled by other Roman-appointed governors.

Jews Move to Rome—First Expulsion 19 AD

During this time some Jews immigrated to Rome, making use of the traditional lack of Roman control over entry into the city. However, their presence aroused a marked anti-Semitism even among the fairly easygoing Romans. In 19 AD, the Jews were to experience for the first time a situation with which they would later become familiar. In that year, the Roman emperor Tiberius formally barred all Jews from Rome and deported all those he could find in the city. This ban on Jews only lasted a few years, for it was not long before they, along with ever increasing numbers of other foreigners from all parts of the empire, once again took up residence in Rome. By this time, Jews had started settling in other parts of the Middle East, Asia Minor, North Africa, and Egypt, in each of these places attracting the enmity of the local populations.

Jewish Revolt—“Horrid Cruelties”

In Palestine, dissension was always brewing. In 66 AD, nationalist Jews rebelled against Roman rule, and the Roman garrison in Jerusalem were slaughtered. The revolt spread quickly to all parts of the province, fanned by a marked hatred for Rome.

This Jewish hatred for the original Roman Empire was well documented to the point where the famous English historian Edward Gibbon, in his classic work, The Decline and Fall of the RomanEmpire(Lippincourt, Philadelphia, 1878, vol. 2, page 4), had the following to say: “From the reign of Nero to that of Antoninus Pius, the Jews discovered a fierce impatience of the dominion of Rome, which repeatedly broke out in the most furious massacres and insurrections. Humanity is shocked at the recital of horrid cruelties which they committed in the cities of Egypt, of Cyria, and of Cyrene, where they dwelt in treacherous friendship with the unsuspecting natives; and we are tempted to applaud the severe retaliation which was exercised by the arms of the Legions against a race of fanatics whose dire and credulous superstition seemed to render them the implacable enemies not only of the Roman government, but of all human kind.”

It was, therefore, not surprising that the Romans sent an army to quell a new uprising in 68 AD. This successfully squashed the Jewish rebellion in 70 AD, and the last of the Jewish rebels were besieged at the mountaintop fort of Masada.

After a lengthy siege, Masada fell to the Romans in 73 AD. Palestine remained under nominal Roman control for some eight hundred years thereafter, first as part of the Western Roman Empire, and then as part of the Eastern Roman Empire.

MASADA—JEWISH REBELLION

The hilltop fort of Masada, Israel. During the course of the Jewish rebellion (which started in 68 AD), Roman legions occupied Jerusalem in 70 AD. They drove out or killed the Jews in the city, and about one thousand remaining Jewish rebels fled to the remote mountain fort. Undeterred, the Romans followed them and laid siege to the rebel stronghold. After a two year siege, during which the Romans built a massive earth ramp all the way up the one side of the mountain (which can still be seen in the foreground), all but seven of the Jews committed suicide rather than being taken alive, fully aware of the fate that awaited them should they be captured by the avenging Romans.

Titus Suppresses Jewish Revolt in Palestine—Triggers Diaspora 70 AD

The suppression of the 70 AD rebellion had another important consequence. The Romans, furious at the continued rebellions, renamed Jerusalem Ælia Capitolina and outlawed the practice of Judaism. Jews were forbidden entrance to the city under pain of death. As a result, the Jews were scattered throughout the world in a movement known as the Diaspora. A large number went north into southern Russia, mixing with local tribes along the way and eventually penetrating into eastern and central Europe.

A number of Jews went out along Turkey and settled in Rome, while a small number settled in Gaul. However, not all Jews went north—a significant portion went west along the North African coast, setting up Jewish communities all the way to Tunisia, and finally crossing into southern Spain.

EMPEROR TITUS—CRUSHES JEWS AND TRIGGERS DIASPORA

The emperor Titus—Roman conqueror of the Jews and destroyer of Jerusalem, an act accomplished in 70 AD. In 68 AD, the Jews rebelled against Roman rule, despite having originally asked the Romans to occupy that land to bring order and peace to it. Roman revenge for the Jewish vacillation was severe—the Jews were forbidden to enter Jerusalem upon pain of death and dispersed from Palestine into North Africa and the Middle East in a movement known as the Diaspora. This laid the basis for the great Jewish immigration into Europe. Above: A Roman denarius depicting Titus, 79A.D. The reverse commemorates his triumph in Palestine and shows a kneeling Jewish prisoner.

ROMANS DISPLAY JEWISH TROPHIES ON ARCH OF TITUS FROM VICTORIOUS CAMPAIGN IN PALESTINE

The crushing of the Jewish revolt in 68 AD by a Roman army was commemorated as a great feat of arms. On the Arch of Titus, erected in Rome and still standing to this day, Roman soldiers are shown bringing Jewish trophies (note the menorah taken from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem) back to Rome.

Origin of the Ashkenazim and Sephardim Division in Jewry

The Jews who went to Europe via the east absorbed a substantial amount of European blood, and became known as the Ashkenazim, or European Jews. Those who settled in North Africa became known as the Sephardim. This division in Jewry exists to this day, and is most marked in Israel where the two communities, the Ashkenazim or “light” Jews and the Sephardim or “dark” Jews (dark because they did not mix with the number of Europeans to the same extent that the Ashkenazim did) tend to vote for different Israeli political parties.

Only their unique religion has kept them bound together after a fashion, although even this is divided into subsects.

Judaism—Uniquely Racial Religion

Although Christianity sprang from Judaism, its Jewish adherents were at first fiercely persecuted by the Jewish religious leaders. This was linked to the fact that Judaism had one particularly unique trait in that it was the first specifically racial religion. While all other religions had no limitations on who could become adherents, Judaism was limited by blood inheritance.

The uniqueness of the Jewish god was that he was a god only for the Jews, not for anyone else. Biological laws of descent were built into Judaism as divinely inspired laws. To this day, there is a rule that only someone born of a Jewish mother can be a Jew.

While some less strict Jewish communities have relaxed this rule to allow conversions from other faiths, the orthodox Jewish community follows this law to the letter. It is still followed to this day in Israel as citizenship is based exclusively on Jewish descent and not national origin.

Essene Beliefs—Origins of Christianity

While this racial religion unquestionably helped to preserve the Jewish identity, it irked some of them, who felt that their god was for all people, and not just the Jews. Around the year 100 BC, this dissenting group founded a new sect. It was loosely based on parts of the Talmud and introduced some new ideas to Judaism, most notably that their god was for all people.

This dissenting group of Jews became known as the Essenes. They developed a whole series of books relating to morals and lifestyles, including a monastic tradition, and pacifism. Most notably, they claimed to have a teacher, who they called the “Teacher of Righteousness,” who, they said, had been murdered and then rose from the dead.

ESSENE’S DEAD SEA SCROLLS—OLDEST BIBLICAL TEXTS

The Book of Isaiah, as laid out in the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in Palestine in 1947. They were the holy books of a subsect of Jews called the Essenes, who lived in the first century BC. The Essenes were persecuted by other Jews, who disagreed violently with the Essene belief that the Jewish god, Yahweh, was actually a god for all people, and not just the Jews. Many of the concepts which were later to become fundamental to Christianity were contained in the Essene religion. They even had an allegorical story about a wise prophet who was killed and then rose from the dead, known to them as the “Teacher of Righteousness.”

The universality of their version of Jahweh (that he was a god for all people, not just for the Jews) remained the biggest point of difference between the Essenes and mainstream Judaism. This ideological clash eventually brought the Essenes into open conflict with their fellow Jews, and the rabbinical leaders urged the Jews to stamp out the new cult. Although it is not recorded what happened to the Essenes in Judea (it is presumed that the Jewish suppression worked in that region), the Essene tradition lived on among a small group of Jews, most of whom eventually left Palestine for more receptive ears elsewhere in the Roman Empire.

In Judea, the Essenes all but vanished, leaving behind only some of their holy books which they hid in caves around the Dead Sea. It was these books, discovered by chance in 1947, which become known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The basic ideology and format which the Essenes created laid the basis for what later became Christianity. It combined three major elements: the base beliefs of Judaism (today the Bible’s Old Testament), the Indo-Aryan Zoroastrian (Persian) belief of heaven and hell (which does not appear in the Old Testament), and the Essene story of a killed and resurrected leader. From these strands, the religion was reworked and reformulated until it finally became Christianity.

Jesus Christ—No Contemporary Evidence

It is an important but little known fact that there is no contemporary (from his time) evidence showing that the biblical figure of Jesus Christ actually existed. The first source of information about the person who became known as Jesus Christ are the Gospels of the Bible’s New Testament. As these works only appeared some 80 to 120 years after Christ’s death, they are not contemporaneous. It is therefore possible that the person who was deified by Christianity could be a composite character based on the stories surrounding several Essene leaders, particularly the one they called the “Teacher of Righteousness.”

The first time that the name Jesus Christ appears in any Roman records (and they were generally meticulous in record keeping) is the book The Jewish Wars, by Josephus, a Romanized Jew, who was commissioned to write a history of the Jewish rebellion. Josephus’s work was first published in 90 AD.

Other researchers have claimed that even this reference is a later addition to Josephus’s work, citing irregularities in the actual passage. In the disputed passage, Josephus makes mention of a small sect of Jews who claim to follow a messiah figure called Jesus, but the mention is brief and in passing. In any event, by the time of Christ’s alleged death (circa 33 AD) Christianity had very few followers, especially among the Jews themselves, who regarded the Christian philosophy as nothing but a reworking of the Essene cult, and did their best to silence it.

Saul of Tarsus Launches Christianity

One of the most zealous of these Jewish persecutors of the Essene ideology was a man by the name of Saul of Tarsus. He is unique in that he is the one major character who features in the New Testament for whom contemporaneous evidence does exist.

At some stage, according to the Bible, Saul experienced a vision and was persuaded that the Christian religion which he had been suppressing was actually correct. Saul then changed his name to Paul and set off on long evangelistic tours of Asia Minor, Cyprus, and Greece, attracting small bands of followers and writing proselytizing pieces along the way. Returning to preach in Jerusalem, he was violently attacked by his fellow Jews and was imprisoned for two years. Following an appeal to the Roman emperor, Paul was transferred to Rome in 60 AD. Placed under house arrest, he was eventually beheaded by the emperor Nero, who developed a particular hatred for the new religion. Paul did much to create and solidify the groundwork for Christianity, and many of his writings were taken up into the New Testament.

Roman Persecution and Tolerance of Christianity

The official Roman attitude to religion was one of tolerance—except when openly subversive to Roman rule. Early Christians refused to take part in any Roman state ceremonies (viewing them as pagan) and would not serve in the army or hold public office, echoing the Essene beliefs of a century earlier. This attitude prompted the Roman leadership to begin a program of persecution against the Christians.

The first major campaign was launched by the emperor Decius in 250 AD and the last by Diocletian in 302 AD. However, the campaigns of sustained persecution of Christians had the opposite effect to that intended. The new religion thrived on martyrdom, and Christianity steadily gained new adherents despite the state’s attempts to stamp it out.

The Christian religion had to compete for supremacy with a number of other religions in the Middle East and the Roman Empire. It only grew large enough to be a serious contender after theemperorGalerius issued an Edict of Toleration in 311, making Christianity legal in the eastern part of the empire.

NERO—MALIGNED ENEMY OF CHRISTIANITY

The Roman emperor Nero reigned from 37 AD to 68 AD, and was a great persecutor of Christianity, overseeing the throwing of Christians to the lions in the Coliseum among other things. As a result, later historical accounts of his life tend to be biased, leading to his portrayal as the personification of evil. In July 64 AD, two-thirds of Rome burned while Nero was at Antium. Biased versions of history have usually held that he either set the fire—something that was impossible, as he was not present—or that he played the fiddle while Rome burned (the fiddle was not invented until 1500 years after his death). Nero claimed to have proof that Christians had set the fire, and persecuted them even more vigorously after the event. In contrast to his image as an uncaring madman, he ordered that all the people made homeless as a result of the fire be housed and provided with grain, all at state expense. He then had the city rebuilt with fire precautions. Nero was also an accomplished artist and man of letters, and personally acted in several important plays of the time. He was emperor when the Jewish revolt in Palestine broke out. As a result of internal politics, in 68 AD the Gallic and Spanish legions, along with the Praetorian Guards rose against him, and he fled Rome. Declared a public enemy by the senate, he committed suicide in 68 AD.

Constantine’s Conversion 312 AD

The breakthrough for Christianity in the Roman world came with the emperor Constantine’s conversion to that religion in 312 AD. The background to his conversion—or, as many scholars have claimed, his alleged conversion—is shrouded in controversy.

It is said that while engaged in battle with a rival claimant to the throne, Constantine had a vision of a cross in the sky, above which were written the words In Hoc Signo Vinces (“In this sign you will conquer”).

It is alleged that he took this as a sign from the Christian god that he would win the battle—if he converted to Christianity. Constantine went on to win the struggle for the throne, and then did convert to Christianity.

While many have questioned the veracity of the “vision” story, the reality is that Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which legalized Christianity throughout the empire and placed it on a par with all other religions.

With the conversion of the emperor of Rome to Christianity, the established pattern of following the emperor’s lead in religious matters came into play. Very rapidly, Christianity became one of the most popular religions throughout the Roman Empire.

CONSTANTINE CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY 312 AD

Constantine at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, 312 AD. This decisive battle by Constantine against a rival claimant to the Eastern Roman Empire’s throne marked a major turning point in history. It was here that Constantine reputedly saw, written in the sky, the Latin phrase “In Hoc Signo Vinces” (in this sign you will conquer) and a cross. By choosing Christianity and the cross as his emblem, Constantine caused the Christianization of the Roman Empire and ultimately all of Europe.

“Donation of Constantine”—A Fabrication

Constantine’s conversion to Christianity led directly to the most famous forgery in European history, known as the “Donation of Constantine.” This document purports to be a signed document by Constantine with its principal feature the granting of temporal authority over the city of Rome and the entire Roman Empire to the bishop of Rome (who was to become the pope).

Although there are many glaring factual errors in the text of the document, which by themselves show the document to be a forgery, the Donation of Constantine was accepted as genuine until the fifteenth century. It was used by the Catholic Church to claim political power in the Roman Empire and all Christian lands. Eventually the Donation of Constantine was rejected as a forgery—but by then the Church had established itself in almost all of Europe, power founded on a forgery.

Julian the Apostate

One of Constantine’s successors, the emperor Julian, attempted to reverse the Christianization process, earning him the name Julian the Apostate. He simply overturned Constantine’s adoption of Christianity as the state religion, relegating it to just one of many competing religions once again. The manner in which Julian reversed the progress of Christianity served as an example of the arbitrary way in which the personal wishes of the emperor could influence the whole empire.

To underline the point, the next emperor after Julian converted the empire back into a formal Christian state. The end result of all this to-and-fro activity was that from the year 395 AD, Christianity became the legal, sole, and official religion of the Roman Empire.

Christianity became widely known in southern Europe some 1,700 years ago, and was only accepted in northern Europe many hundreds of years after that. The last northern European country to formally adopt Christianity was Iceland around the year 1,000 AD.

EMPEROR JULIAN—PAGANISM’S CHAMPION

The emperor Julian, nephew of the Christianizer Constantine, was raised as a Christian, but always secretly abhorred that religion and favored the old Roman gods. When he became emperor in 361, he overturned his uncle’s decision to favor Christianity, and very nearly halted the progress of that religion through the empire. His successors were Christians and they undid his reforms.

The Office of the Pope

As Christianity became formalized throughout the empire, each major town was assigned a religious leader, called a bishop. Gradually the bishop of Rome came to be recognized as the most important, and assumed the title of “Pope” (from the Greek word meaning father).

By the seventh century AD, the pope had become the spiritual leader of all Christendom and was in possession of great political power, aided by the forged Donation of Constantine. The pope even adopted the Roman emperors’ color, purple, which to this day remains the most used color in the Catholic Church.

Disputes Almost Immediate

Although there was initially only one Christian church—the Catholic Church—disputes over interpretations of the religion broke out among its supporters. As Christianity spread, it became more and more disorganized, with serious disputes erupting among the various missionaries.

One of the earliest clashes was over the concept of what was called “Arianism” (named after Arius, a Christian leader in Alexandria), in regard to the three components of the Trinity: God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost. The belief that all three of these beings were one and the same was challenged by Arius who argued that the Christ figure could not be God as well. So seriously was this dispute taken, thatEmperorConstantine called a special meeting of all the major leaders of the religion in 325 AD, to the now famous Council of Nicaea, to discuss the problem. At the Council of Nicaea it was decided that the Arian doctrine was incorrect, and it was declared a heresy.

Bible Created—First Council of Nicaea 325 AD

Several other disputes over doctrine made the religious leaders gathered at Nicaea realize that if some weighty final word on the outline of their belief was not forthcoming, the religion could splinter into factions. The problem was that there was no such outline or book in existence.

The council at Nicaea then took it upon themselves to create such a book, and turned to whatever texts they could find. To achieve this, they gathered up all the existing manuscripts being used by the Christian church in various parts of the empire, and compared and selected which ones to include in the final version.

This was not without its difficulties. The books now contained in the Old Testament were largely oral before 300 BC, although some had been written down by Jewish rabbis. King Ptolemy II ofPhiladelphus (285–246 BC) is credited with ordering the translation of the Jewish religious books into Greek. The Christian version of the Old Testament was only established as a comprehensive work by the scribe Origen around 250 AD, and up until that time only loose translations of the Ptolemaic Greek work formed the basis of that religion’s teachings.

CODEX SINAITICUS—WORLD’S OLDEST “COMPLETE” BIBLE

The Codex Sinaiticus, a manuscript of the Bible written in the middle of the fourth century AD, contains the earliest existent copy of the New Testament and most of the Old Testament, on display at the British Library in London. The handwritten text is in Greek. The New Testament appears in the original vernacular lang-uage (koine). The Old Testament is the version known as the Septuagint which was adopted by early Greek-speaking Christians. The Codex Sinaiticus was probably compiled after the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, at which disparate manuscripts used by Christian leaders all over the Roman world were compiled into one book to try and avoid disputes over interpretation. Modern Bibles differ in a number of places from the Codex Sinaiticus, which omits the following verses: Matthew 12:47, 16:2b–3, 17:21, 18:11; Mark 15:28, 16:8–20; Luke 22:43–44; John 5:4; Epistle to the Romans 16:24. Phrases which do not appear include: Mark 1:1, “the Son of God;” Matthew 6:13, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen;” Luke 23:34, “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” An interesting part of the Codex Sinaiticus which was omitted in later versions of the Bible can be found in its Matthew 27:49 verse which describes the piercing of Christ’s side by a Roman solider with a spear while on the cross. According to the Codex version, the soldier “took a spear and pierced His side, and immediately came out water and blood.”

New Testament Collated 200 AD—Vague Origins of Biblical Writings

The origins of the New Testament are very vague. By the end of the first century AD, the writings of Saul/Paul (called the Pauline Epistles) consisting of letters to the various Christian communities in Asia Minor and Rome had been established as a collection of inspired works. The Gospels which make up the first part of the New Testament only emerged after the writings of Paul had become well-known, and long after his death.

This is evidenced by the fact that in his writings there is no mention of any other New Testament book or gospel, and his account of what Jesus did on the night he was betrayed (1 Corinthians 11:23) differs substantially from that recounted in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is clear that if the four gospels were in existence at the time when Paul wrote his epistles (around the year 55 AD), he would have at least mentioned them, or very likely quoted from them. The earliest existent gospel consists of fragments of the Gospel of John in the Greek language. These fragments date from about 100 AD.

By 200 AD, the Church had developed the New Testament in its present form, although it was still written in various languages, including Greek and Hebrew.

The only book which did not yet feature in the collected works was the Book of Revelation. Where this last section came from no one knows for sure, but by the fourth century it had been included in the New Testament. Not all of these various manuscripts were in accord with each other, and this presented a real problem for the Council of Nicaea. Finally, the decision was taken to simply leave out several early Christian manuscripts which did not fit in with the other books. The most famous of these “left out” (or “apocryphal”) books include the Book of Enoch, the Epistle of Jude, the Epistle of Barnabas, fragments of the Book of Jubilees, and the Gospel of St. Thomas. The latter was discarded because the events described therein are at serious variance with the events described in the four more well-known Gospels.

The Council of Nicaea went a long way toward formalizing the Bible as Christians know it today, in an attempt to prevent the church from splitting again as it nearly did over the Arian controversy. In this attempt they failed, and some of the most grievous conflicts in Europe were over different interpretations of the Bible.

Spread of Christianity Is Resisted

When the Roman Empire in the West collapsed, Christianity had been spread throughout its former dominions, with the exception of the Germans, the Balts, and a significant section of the Slavs. Nonetheless, the Germanic tribes who participated in the sacking of Rome at the formal end of that empire did not destroy the Roman Catholic Church along with the Roman state.

The leader of the church in Rome, the pope, survived the Germanic invasions, and went on to become an important political player in his own right. The Church also lost no time in sending Christian missionaries to the pagan tribes, the most famous of them being Wufilas (311–383 AD), who worked among the Visigoths. Another famous missionary was Patrick, who, although born in Britain, went to Ireland and became the Christianizer of that island, later being made a saint by the church for his efforts.

Saxon Invasion of Britain

The Roman Christianization of the British Isles was set back with the invasion of those lands by pagan Germans (the Angles and Saxons) following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. As a result, most of the British mainland became pagan once again, with Christianity only surviving in the Celtic fringes of Ireland and Wales. To counteract this development, the Catholic Church sent a missionary, St. Augustine, to Britain from Rome in 597 AD. Augustine managed to convert an important Anglo-Saxon ruler to Christianity, and that religion began to spread once again in Britain.

Christian Britain in turn gave rise to the missionary, St. Boniface, who spent thirty-five years among the German tribes on the mainland of Europe before he was killed in 755 AD. Catholic missionaries were also active among the Germanic tribes living in Scandinavia, but met with much less success than in Britain or Central Europe.

AUGUSTINE REINTRODUCES CHRISTIANITY TO BRITAIN

The return of Christianity to Britain. That religion, introduced during late Roman rule, had been stamped out in England during the Angle and Saxon Germanic invasions following the fall of Rome. In 597 AD, the pope sent a missionary, St. Augustine, to try and Christianize the British population. He was fortunate in receiving the aid of King Ethelbert and his queen, Bertha, and managed to establish a significant Christian following in that land. Here Augustine is pictured preaching to a Saxon king.

The Conversion of the Frankish King Clovis I in 496 AD

The Franks were a Germanic tribe who had emerged from northern Europe to occupy much of what is today Germany and France. With the fall of the Roman Empire, the Frankish tribes had set up small kingdoms scattered up and down the length and breadth of these two territories.

One of the most important conversions to Christianity on the mainland of Europe was the first king of the Franks, Clovis I, in 496 AD. He invaded the Visigoth Empire in 507 AD, causing them to abandon the part of France they had occupied since the fall of Rome and to retreat to Spain. The Frankish king, Pepin the Short, who reigned from 741 to 768 AD, was notable for being the first ruler of France to receive from the pope an official sanction to his kingship. Pepin was crowned by the English missionary, St. Boniface, acting on behalf of the pope, in 752 AD. This would be the first of many times that the pope would see fit to approve leaders of states in the name of God.

In 768, Pepin’s son, Charlemagne (Charles the Great), inherited the Frankish kingdom. It was this king who was directly responsible for the introduction of Christianity to the Germans.

Charlemagne Murders Tens of Thousands of Non-Christian Saxons

To destroy German paganism, Charlemagne proclaimed harsh laws applicable to those Germans under his control who refused to be baptized into Christianity. Eating meat during Lent, cremating the dead, and pretending to be baptized were all made punishable by death. In 768 AD, Charlemagne started a thirty-two-year long campaign of what can only be described as genocidal evangelism against the Saxons under his control in western Germany.

CHARLEMAGNE AND ENFORCED CHRISTIANITY

The sword and the cross: Charlemagne, and two of his armed priests. The Frankish king was directly responsible for the forced and violent introduction of Christianity to much of western Europe. This was at least partially achieved by killing pagans who did not want to convert to Christianity.

The campaign started with the cutting down of the Saxon’s most sacred tree, their version of the World Tree or Yggdrasil (the symbol of the start of the earth and the source of all life in the ancient Indo-European religions), located in a forest near present-day Marburg.

Charlemagne quickly turned to violence as a means of spreading Christianity. In 772, at Quierzy, he issued a proclamation that he would kill every Saxon who refused to accept Jesus Christ, and from that time on he kept a special detachment of Christian priests who doubled as executioners. In every Saxon village in which they stopped, these priests would execute anybody who refused to be baptized.

Then in 782, at Verden, Charlemagne carried out the act for which he is most notoriously associated. He ordered the beheading of 4,500 Saxons who had been caught practicing paganism after they had agreed to become Christians. Charlemagne’s constant companion and biographer, the monk Einhard, vividly captured the event in his biography of the Frankish king. In it is written that the king rounded up 4,500 Saxons who “like dogs that return to their vomit” had returned to the pagan religions they had been forced to give up upon pain of death. After having all these Saxons beheaded, “the king went into winter camp, and there celebrated mass as usual.” Twelve years later, in 794, Charlemagne introduced a law under which every third Saxon living in any pagan area was kidnapped and forced to resettle and be raised among Christian Franks.

With the use of violent and bloody coercion, Saxon and German paganism was quite literally killed off. Most of the survivors became Christians more out of fear than out of genuine conviction.

Christianity finally spread to the Goths, through a Christian slave named Wulfila, who translated the Bible into Gothic. Before the end of the fourth century, Christianity had spread to the Vandals, theBurgundians, the Lombards, and other German tribes within the direct sphere of influence of the Western Roman Empire. By the year 550 AD, the only non-Christian tribes were to be found in Bavaria and those parts of Germany north from there—including almost all of the Danes, Scandinavians, Balts, and Slavs to the east.

Pagan Origins of Christmas and Easter

Through sheer terror, Christianity then became the dominant religion of the previously pagan central Europe. Yet, because some pagan customs were far too entrenched to be rooted out, they were quietly incorporated into Christianity. In this way, Easter, for example, was absorbed to become a celebration of the resurrection of Christ—although its pagan origins are clearly shown in the symbolism of the egg and the rabbit. Both of these come directly from the pagan goddess of fertility, Eoster (from which Easter was derived), who used the egg and rabbit as fertility symbols. The date of Easter—at springtime, when new life emerged from winter, was linked to Eoster, and this was why it was celebrated at that time of year.

The same happened with the winter solstice, which was originally a pagan celebration to mark the turning point of winter. The pagans marked the longest night of the year with a fire, a pine tree, and gifts to mark the fact that they had survived yet another winter. Christianity combined the solstice celebration with the birth of Christ, in this way preserving much of the outer trappings of the pagan celebration which are still kept in modern times.

The church was uneasy with the pagan undertones of the celebration, particularly the “Christmas tree.” This led to the Catholic Church officially banning the celebration of Christmas no less than three times, all of which were unsuccessful.

Christmas was also banned in Britain by Oliver Cromwell in 1647, and in 1659 by the Puritans in the American colony town of Boston in New England. The ban in Boston was so long lasting that Christmas only became fashionable again in that city in the 1800s.

BONIFACE CUTS DOWN THOR’S SACRED TREE

The Christian missionary, St. Boniface, cutting down the sacred great oak tree of Geismar, Hesse, in 724 AD. The oak tree was sacred to the god Thor, and was one of many pagan sites which the Christians destroyed in their ultimately successful campaign to extinguish the pagan religions. Similar acts of desecration were carried out against numerous non-Christian sites, with Roman temples singled out for destruction. Despite this, many of the original customs remained, such as the celebration of the spring and winter solstices. The Christians took the celebration of the pagan goddess of fertility, Eoster, and turned it into the Christian rite of Easter. The winter solstice, which marked the longest night of winter, was turned into the festival today known as Christmas.

Teutonic Knights Exterminate Baltic Pagans

The only significant group of whites left in Europe who were not, nominally at least, Christians by the year 1000 AD, were found in eastern Europe and along the Baltic Sea coast. To destroy this last bastion of paganism, the Church employed the services of some of the most fanatic Christians of all—the Teutonic Knights. This organization was first established in Palestine in 1190 as a charitable religious military order, providing first aid during the Crusades. By 1198 they had taken on a military role and took an active part in the war against the Muslims, becoming known as the Teutonic Knights.

Membership in the order was strictly limited to Christian German noblemen. The Teutonic Knights received official recognition from Pope Innocent III in 1199, and adopted the official uniform of a white tunic with a black cross. Soon their deeds on behalf of Christendom became famous. In 1210 they were invited to Hungary by the king of that country to participate in a war against the non-Christian pagan tribes in eastern Europe.

The Teutonic Knights responded to the call, and through the use of violent tactics similar to those employed by Charlemagne, became the Christianizers of the people of that region. This task soon became the sole obsession of the Teutonic Knights, and by 1226 the order had set up permanent settlements in northeastern Europe.

Teutonic Knights Stamp out Paganism

In 1226, the Holy Roman Emperor granted the Teutonic Knights control over what was then Prussia (today northern Poland) to rule as a fiefdom on condition that they converted all the locals to Christianity. In 1234, Pope Gregory IX granted the Knights control over any other territory that they might conquer from the pagans. The Teutonic Knights soon built a series of imposing castles to defend their new territory, some of which still stand today.

The fortress Ordensburg Marienburg, built in 1274 by the Teutonic Knights and located in present-day Poland. Originally called Marienburg, and now known by the Polish name Malborg, this castle was the seat of the Teutonic Order in the Baltic.

From the safety of these castles they waged their own brand of evangelicalism, which was limited to the Frankish king Charlemagne’s recipe: once a number of pagans had been captured, they were offered the choice of either accepting Christianity and being baptized, or being killed on the spot. Unsurprisingly, almost all chose conversion. The price for being caught practicing paganism after being baptized was death. As was the case with the genocidal evangelicalism of Charlemagne, the first one or two generations of converts were in all likelihood not genuine.

Usually they would pay lip service to Christianity in order not to be killed (there is evidence for this in the numerous recorded instances of the tribes reverting to their pagan ways once the Teutonic Knights had moved on to a new area). However, by the third generation or so, the young children knew no other religion, and in this way Christianity replaced the original Indo-European religions.

The Teutonic Knights realized that the easiest way to change the nature of a society was to change its inhabitants, and actively encouraged already Christianized Germans to settle in Prussia. By 1300, the Teutonic Knights were one of the most powerful organizations in Germany, controlling territory which stretched from the Baltic Sea into central Germany, a private empire which saw them engaging in, on average, eight major wars every year.

Battle of Tannenburg Sees Knights Defeated 1410

It was only a matter of time before the Teutonic Knights ran out of pagans to convert. By 1386, the last of the major non-Christian tribes in the north, the Lithuanians, had all more or less been converted, and the order started to lose the reason for its existence. In addition to this, the methods employed by the order had not endeared it to the local populations, even though they were all now Christians. This enmity flared up into a new war in 1409, when the king of Poland invited all enemies of the Teutonic Knights to participate in a campaign against the order. This led to the Battle of Tannenburg in 1410, which saw the Teutonic Knights defeated.

In 1525, the order’s grand master, Albrecht of Hohenzollern, became a Protestant and dissolved the order in Prussia. Scattered elements of the order lived on but the last were finally expelled in 1591 from the Baltic.

Christianity came to be the dominant religion of Europe for four reasons:

Firstly, paganism was swept aside because it was less organized and formalized; secondly, those hardcore pagans who refused to convert were either threatened with death or in some cases just executed; thirdly, Christianity was used as a political excuse by kings and popes to expand their own territories; and fourthly, through the use of syncretism (the merging of many aspects of European paganism with Christian belief).