

Church History 101
Lesson 12
From Pagan to Christian

Key Concepts: Even though the church had been legalized and had the backing of the government, its members were still a minority within the Empire and it took a considerable period of time for Christianity to replace the earlier Roman religion.

The Story: As was noted in previous articles, Christianity was persecuted off and on over the first three hundred years of its existence. This persecution ended with a declaration of tolerance by Emperor Galerius (311) and was codified in the Edict of Milan (313). Tolerance of Christianity soon gave way to active support under Emperor Constantine (c. 272 – c. 337). He built churches, took an active role in the life of the church (including declaring himself to be its head), gave tax breaks to clergy and insured that all previously confiscated churches were returned to the church. Though Constantine still insisted that all Romans worship the Sun god, he finally declared himself to be a Christian. The impact of his favoring of Christianity can be seen when, at his death, mobs in Constantinople, sacked pagan shrines and stole much of the wealth they contained.

Constantine was succeeded by his son Constantius II who began the slow but steady process of removing all vestiges of Paganism from the Empire. It began in the 350s when Constantius II encouraged legislation that banned all temple sacrifices. This was consistent with his motto of, “Let superstition cease; let the folly of sacrifice be abolished.” By 353 he had imposed the penalty of death on anyone making a sacrifice and then began shutting down temples, forbidding access to them and ending any public funding of pagan activities. In the face of the destruction of pagan temples by Christians, which he did not actively try to stop, the Emperor fined those who committed such acts. At the same time Constantius did not wipe out all vestiges of pagan culture (though there were many Christians encouraging him to do so). He left open pagan schools and some of the more well-known pagan cults such as the Vestal Virgins (priestesses of Vesta, the goddess of the hearth).

These changes did not go unchallenged and were often not well received. There were many places in the Roman Empire where paganism was still strong and the commands of the Emperor were ignored by the local leaders. In the Roman Senate, Constantius removed the Altar of Victory, which had been installed in 29 BCE, but after his death it was immediately restored. Constantius’ successor Julian (r. 361-363) attempted to restore paganism as the religion of the Empire and he rejected Christianity because of its intolerance of other faiths. He withdrew Christian privileges and ordered those who had destroyed temples to rebuild them. Even so he did not either persecute Christians or force them to offer pagan sacrifices.

Following the death of Julian in 363, there was a decade of tolerance driven by the next three short-lived Emperors. This changed in 375 with a new Emperor, Gratian, who began a series of anti-pagan acts including confiscation of their property and revenues. This persecution continued under his successor Theodosius I (347-395) who essentially banned all pagan practices (including those in homes), some under the penalty of death. The struggle between paganism and Christianity continued off and on through the period of 450-488 during which there were numerous plans and revolts by pagans to regain control of the Empire, all of which failed and only served to increase the persecution of those who desired to return to Roman religion. Ultimately most pagans either went underground or converted to Christianity.

Questions:

1. Do you see any similarities between the oppression of Christians and that of pagans?
2. Do you think Congress should make Christianity the official religion of the United States?
3. Where do you see the tension today between majority and minority religions?