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The Devil's Chapel: Pagan Influences on the Early Church

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THE DEVIL'S CHAPEL: PAGAN INFLUENCES ON THE EARLY CHURCH

Introduction

When the average Christian hears the word 'pagan' it likely conjures up visages of shadowy figures dancing around a fire wearing ghoulish masks, but this is a far cry from the Pagans the fathers of the church faced in the fourth century. Some of these very influences on the church have remained part of it up to the current day but few realize the origins of such things. The early church from which all modern Christianity came has been forged through centuries of change since it began and one of its earliest enemies was the Roman pagans who infiltrated it in the fourth century and to clearly understand the history of the church, one must understand the pagan influences such as fetishism, female deity, professionalism, sacramentalism, sacerdotalism, and others that it faced in its infancy.

The Rise of Pagan Influences

The year is 312 A.D. and Constantine is preparing for a major battle with the emperor of the eastern Roman Empire Licinius in hopes of taking the throne as the sole ruler of Rome. As recorded by Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine saw a vision of the cross in the sky and heard the words 'in this sign thou shalt conquer'¹.

The fire built up inside of him and his army won the battle with little contest and he became the sole emperor of Rome. In the year 323 AD, he declared Christianity as the preferred religion of Rome and even began openly persecuting Pagans². A sudden mass influx of new believers was inevitable.

Whether or not these new believers intentionally carried their beliefs to the church or simply followed their natural predisposition is uncertain, however the church now had a new challenge – paganism - beginning to interweave itself into the beliefs of the early church. Situations such as this, however, are prime examples of the oft-quoted statement made by Daniel Defoe that wherever God builds a church, the Devil builds a chapel next door³. Shortly after its freedom was granted, the Church now had to battle countless elements of the culture it had been disgusted by during its persecution.

Factors of Pagan Influence

Although it might seem that most new converts joined the church because of Constantine's declaration, which is essentially true, there were still other factors that lead to the influx of new members. One of the most unique factors is the exposure to and adoration of the Church's early martyrs who willingly gave their lives in defense of the faith. This conviction not only served as an inspiration for believers and non-believers alike who were often fearful to profess their faith but also led the second century Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius to admire them⁴. Despite being a time of intense tribulation, the martyrs inspired enough people with their dedication to their faith that these people (or perhaps their descendents) sought membership in the church once legalized to finally have something worth dying for in the seemingly vacuous world around

them. Even so, it is natural to assume that the romanticism of the idea was more difficult to carry into practice without resorting to their old beliefs in some fashion.

It is hard to imagine the waves of new converts that the church experienced during its fourth century growth and if teaching the body of disciples in the current day is challenging even with a small church, the amount of sound teaching required to reach the influx of people in the early Church is unfathomable. To this end, the likelihood of a new believer in the fourth century Church to have more than just a vague grasp of doctrine and practice was relatively unlikely. While this does not excuse the corruptions that the leaders of the church permitted, it supports the case that such an inclusion was ultimately unavoidable.

Furthermore, by the time the Church was legally allowed to exist, its members were likely second or third generation Christians who were quite far removed from the apostles that originally founded their church. With each generation that passed, it is only logical to infer that some of the original teachings were at least slightly degraded if not lost during the era of martyrdom and persecution leading to a more fractal understanding of Christ's teachings. Not having as firm of a foundation as their forefathers, the existing membership of the church would not have been as well equipped to challenge influences that were brought to their doors. In fact, it is surprising that the amount of documented corruptions was not vastly larger and it very well may have been larger just not documented as clearly by church historians.

Examples of Pagan Corruptions

The actual definition of 'pagan' is so vast that it is impossible to define it clearly and still consider the cultural milieus associated with it. But for the purpose of this discussion, it can best be understood as someone who followed the Roman pantheon of Gods. Surprisingly, this practice was quite prominent in the cosmopolitan city of Rome during the early fourth century⁵. It must also be considered that Roman citizenry were known to be quite intellectual. Thusly, situations undoubtedly arose where several young Christians may not have been as educated due to persecution and Pagan ideas brought to the church could easily be presented as quite intellectually sound and receive virtually no scriptural challenge. Thus the study now turns to the consideration of these ideals such as fetishism, female deity, professionalism, sacramentalism, and sacerdotalism among others and what they meant to the early church.

Fetishism

Fetishism in this context, is best understood as an overt obsession with relics such as the bones or clothing of someone of religious importance in Christianity or otherwise. This practice began quite avidly in the world of Christian martyrs with the attempt to salvage the bones of Polycarp when he was martyred⁶. It soon gave way to countless exhumations of Christian martyrs and saints to be moved from their original grave to the site of a newly built church⁷. This concept can be linked to the practice of connecting items with some sort of spiritual creature or divine being whose power would otherwise be impossible to reach as was practiced long before the advent of Christianity.

Some relics considered as most holy and powerful in the church included the bones of Peter, the Apostle Paul and countless martyrs as well as crucifixion relics such as the ‘True Cross’ and ‘The Shroud of Turin’. Although the Catholic Church denounced worship of these relics, they were preserved supposedly to serve as reminders of the history of the Church.

Female Deity

The Greco-Roman Pantheon included many goddesses such as Hera, Zeus’ wife (Juno in Roman Mythology) and Aphrodite (Venus) that were revered as symbols of love, matriarchs, and fertility. Likewise, the Mystery religions of Persia revered the goddess Cybele as the Mother of Earth or *Meter*⁸ from whom the entire earth was created. Moreover, the personification of knowledge among Gnostics was that of Sophia who appears as a beautiful woman. Pagans that joined the church soon began to search for a female deity within it that they could pray to.

As newer Pagan converts came to understand more of the doctrine of the church and the history of Jesus, they soon elevated the Virgin Mary as deity who should be revered as the ‘bearer of God’. Although the Catholic focus was placed on simply reverence to Mary, a small portion of believers created a fundamentalist group defined loosely as Marian Devotees which worshipped Mary as a deity like Christ including a Montanist division known as Collyridians⁹. Worship of female deities was later declared a heresy. Even so, the modern Catholic Church has a high reverence of the Virgin Mary and Helena, Constantine’s mother that could be considered worship.

Professionalism

Jesus declared all of mankind to be his disciples and share the Gospel as Paul professed in Ephesians 4:11-12 so there was no biblical support for a separate priestly class. However, the Pagan world is one that believes only certain people are chosen to fulfill this work and the new converts felt apt to apply this belief to the Church that there were people who are pre-ordained as priests for God, thusly creating a separate 'priest' class¹⁰. Not only did this seem to demand that only certain people could be men of faith but it also began to create a hierarchy within the church that was unknown prior and gave rise to the papal bishoprics prevalent even in the modern church¹¹. Yet the effect of this particular element did not stop there, in fact, it gave rise to the final two elements to which this study now turns: sacramentalism and sacerdotalism.

Sacramentalism

Sacraments have their history in an original element of the church, the ordinance, which was not only scripturally sound but also one of the defining factors of the early believers. Ordinances of the original church only included two items, the Lord's Supper¹² and Baptism¹³ which Jesus had taught his disciples long before the church of this era had been built. These were only to be observed by believers if their heart was in the condition to accept it. Yet, there is a strong distinction between this simple yet valuable concept and what the Pagan influence caused it to become.

It was believed in many Pagan circles that ritualistic events and items would put them in a state that was closer to their gods and thusly be granted certain powers. In the early days of Constantine's reign, these events were still quite prevalent¹⁴ and logic would dictate that when

the new converts joined the church and found how deeply the church revered their ordinances that a similar connection would be made to these elements.

Moreover, when new converts witnessed a mass, they would hear a priest stating the words: “*Hoc est enim corpus meum*” (Latin for ‘this is my body’) and declaring the bread was the body of Christ. Since Latin was not well known among the common people of Rome, the new converts may have even been convinced that a magic spell was being performed. It soon became the norm that Roman churches would carry out their ordinances with all members despite the spiritual state of the believers which gave rise to the thought that these items were necessary for salvation and thusly became a sacrament.

Sacerdotalism

Combining the elements of professionalism and sacramentalism gives rise to the concept of sacerdotalism, or ‘priestism’ meaning that only a holy priest (see professionalism) who has reached the most sacred state (see sacramentalism) is allowed to carry out the sacred rituals of the church¹⁵. The pagan belief of sacerdotalism began in the concept of sacramentalism but it was further solidified in the minds of believers new and old based on the Old Testament distinction of the Levites. Believers of sacerdotalism consider that a layperson in the church cannot be connected with God unless a priest intercedes for them and likewise that various rites can only be performed by a priest.

Other Corruptions

The pagan influences on the early church are numerous and it would be foolish to assume that the items previously mentioned are the only corruptions that have occurred.

It is likely that many more corruptions occurred during this time but there are only two other items that have been documented enough to be included in this study: emperor worship and baptism for the dead. Although neither of these items were as well documented, they still had an influence on the church.

The concept of emperor worship was one of the core beliefs of the early Roman Empire and as their empire spread, they took on a syncretistic view of the religions of the peoples they conquered, even absorbing the Greek Pantheon as their own. Yet, if one did not bow down and worship the emperor of Rome they could be executed for treason¹⁶. It was only when Constantine converted to Christianity that he began to minimize this practice which he did by removing his visage from the temples dedicated to the Roman gods¹⁷. Although the church as a whole rejected the concept, several of the new believers, out of fear of persecution, likely offered their worship to the emperor, especially during the second century, and may have been considered an apostate once the church gained religious freedom.

In far less visible of a fashion than emperor worship, was the practice of baptism for the dead. Many Graeco-Roman cultures and even that of the Egyptians believed that certain things must be done in an attempt to honor the dead and that it would somehow aid the dead along their path to salvation¹⁸. Since the newer converts likely did not have knowledge of the sacrament of baptism until they were inducted, they were prone to think that their dead family passed into Hell due to lack of knowledge of Jesus. To retroactively save their loved one from Hell after death, former pagans sought to baptize an item belonging to a deceased loved one, be it an urn of ashes or some item belonging to their dead family member in hopes this would unlock eternal salvation.

Lasting Impact of Pagan Influences on the Church

The focus of this study thus far has been on the Pagan influences on the early Roman Church as it shaped the beliefs and practices of the time in a manner that could be looked upon much like a picture of the church during this era. But one of the true values of pictures is to be able to look at one from many years ago and see the amount of changes that have happened between the time it originated and its current state. It would take several history classes to be able to see every element that has changed in the church since its beginnings and there is scarce space to detail them in this study but the study would be likewise incomplete without documenting the current status of fetishism, female deity, professionalism, sacramentalism and sacerdotalism in the modern church.

Fetishism was dubbed a heresy by the church only a few short decades after it began yet some believers revered the imagery of saints and other totemic items long after. Fetishism managed to survive even after the Iconoclastic Conflict between the West and Eastern Orthodox Catholics. To this day, there are still many modern Catholics that believe in praying near icons of the church to empower their prayers. Icons such as statues and carvings of Christ and saints can be found in almost any Catholic church building or cathedral and in Catholic homes such as the common crucifix. On the other hand, few churches or homes of reformed Christians will have any kind of depiction of these things save the cross as they are considered idolatry.

With the sole exception of the Marian devotees, the concept of female deity is virtually nonexistent in modern Christianity. The Catholic Church deemed female deity as a heresy and condemned its practice in all aspects of the church. Even so, Catholics are still entitled to venerate the Virgin Mary as a saint¹⁹ and many will pray to her for various reasons.

Furthermore, the Catholic ideology of the ‘Immaculate Heart of Mary’ indicative of the love she showed for the Son of God is very prevalent in the Church and highly revered.

Professionalism has maintained its position through the centuries; it is still a mandate of the Catholic Church that a minister must be ordained as a minister and must have completed collegiate education in Catholic seminary and have completed the other sacraments²⁰. Furthermore, a priest has a very strict lifestyle that he is held to because he is ‘set apart’ from the others of the world. The additional requirements such as celibacy and consistent solitude often pose as a daunting task for one to be a professional priest but are strictly required²¹.

Of all of the influences however, none is quite as blatant and direct in the modern Catholic Church as the concept of sacramentalism. In fact, sacraments became the primary focus of the church as it grew and survived the Crusades. Sacramentalism was further improved by 13th century scholasticism movement and the likes of Thomas Aquinas who wrote the famous *Summa Theologiae* that has become the standard of systematic theology for the Catholic Church. In this work, he rationalized the concept of the Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church, identifying them as Baptism, Confirmation, Mass, Confession, Ordinance (of priests), Marriage (of non priests), and Last Rites. Such has been the defined way for Catholics to receive the Grace of God, provided the Pope approves.

It can be further concluded that since there are sacraments, that means there is also sacerdotalism. Indeed, sacerdotalism survived with its groom, sacramentalism. Because of this belief, Catholics engage only in religious events where a priest is present and people can only receive forgiveness from sin by confessing to the priest and carrying out the penance he assigns. Furthermore, for as long as the Catholic Church feels that sacraments are the only way to receive God's grace, so shall sacerdotalism be ever present.

The final two items mentioned: emperor worship and baptism of the dead have virtually faded into obscurity, especially in context of the Catholic and Protestant churches. However, the extreme esteem to which Catholics elevate the Pope, sometimes seemingly more so than God, might be considered in some ways as a form of emperor worship. The act of baptism for the dead or proxy baptism is still commonly practiced among the adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) movement but is known to them as 'temple baptism'²².

Conclusion

During the early history of the church, it suffered from countless challenges that formed and shaped it throughout history and with each moment of joy, it seems new challengers rose up to face the church. Such was the case with Rome in the 4th century. The early church from which all modern Christianity came has been forged through centuries of change since it began and one of its earliest enemies were the Roman pagans who infiltrated it in the fourth century and to clearly understand the history of the church, one must understand the pagan influences such as fetishism, female deity, professionalism, sacramentalism, sacerdotalism, and others it faced in its infancy.

The history of God's work in the world is ever present. He is ever present in the activities of the past, present and future and nothing that has happened, is happening, or will happen is beyond His control. Just as much, the devil is ever present in history and will act if men do not follow God's plan. When the church was finally free to worship God without fear of persecution, it was a time of great jubilation yet as this manuscript identifies, Satan used this time to plant some seeds that arguably polluted the church in its infancy and grew up with it as the church matured. Nonetheless, the church was reformed under such men as Martin Luther and John Calvin but even these churches, likewise, had their own troubles and still do to this day but such is the topic for another place and time. History does prove however, that Defoe was right, wherever God builds a church, the Devil builds a chapel.

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Endnotes

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- ² Andrew Alfèodi, and Harold Mattingly. *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, 85.
- ³ Defoe, Daniel. *Anatomy of Melancholy*, part iii section 4 Memb. 1 Subsect. 1. (1701).
- ⁴ Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 2-5.
- ⁵ Cameron, Averil and Peter Garsney. *The Cambridge Ancient History Vol.13*, 538.
- ⁶ Nickell, Joe. *Relics of the Christ*, 16.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* 19.
- ⁸ Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*, 34.
- ⁹ Kraemer, Ross Shepard. *Her Share of the Blessings*, 166.
- ¹⁰ Chadwick, Henry. *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*, 182.
- ¹¹ Cameron and Averil, *The Cambridge Ancient History Vol. 13: The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*, 242.
- ¹² González, Justo L, *The Story of Christianity*, 20.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* 63.
- ¹⁴ Chadwick, Henry. *The Church In Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*, 255.
- ¹⁵ Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, s.v. ‘sacerdotalism’
- ¹⁶ Alfèodi and Mattingly. *The Conversion of Constantine*, 59.
- ¹⁷ Curran, John R. *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 208.
- ¹⁸ DeMaris, Richard E. *New Testament in Its Ritual World*, 65.
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