

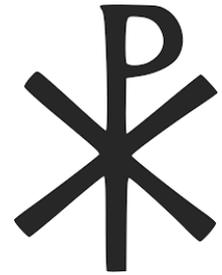
Roman Religion



Augustus as Pontifex Maximus



The Pantheon in Rome



A Christian Chi Rho adopted as a shield device by Constantine



Reconstruction of the Temple of Claudius Colchester



A Mithraeum in Rome



Temple of Antenociticus on Hadrian's Wall Benwell Newcastle



The Mithraeum in the City of London



The British god Antenociticus

Roman religion was complex and varied and any attempt to summarise it in a short article can only bring out the most salient points. It was probably not at all what we would regard as religion today, it embraced culture, ethics, civic duty, law, politics and covered most aspects of life. It was polytheistic, comprising many different cults and a plethora of major and minor deities, it was frequently dictatorial and it was sometimes tolerant.

The peoples of the Roman Republic and the Empire were not exceptions in the ancient world in being both extremely religious and superstitious; everything had a religious significance which required specific cultic observances. Religious orthodoxy was an expression of politics in Roman society and regarded as a demonstration of civic obedience; thus orthodoxy became very much more important with the evolution of the cult of the emperor.

The *gens Julii*, of which Julius Caesar was a member, claimed a direct descent from Aeneas and the gods Venus and Mars. After his assassination his *genius* (his essential or guiding spirit) was deified and then most, but not all, future emperors were given the dignity of *divus* after death. The post of *Pontifex Maximus*, which had been a religious office under the Republic, was politicised by Julius Caesar and Augustus and became the sole prerogative of the Imperial family.

A cult of Emperor worship came to be practiced throughout the Roman Empire and was particularly prevalent in the provinces and the army. It was seen as a unifying factor for the empire and helped to focus the loyalty of citizens and provincials on the Emperor as the epitome of empire. In some provinces there is evidence that it was initiated by the Roman authorities themselves, presumably for that very

reason. Following the conquest of Britain, for example, the Temple of Claudius at Colchester was built during his lifetime and after his death the temple was renamed the *Templum Divi Claudii* (Temple of the Divine Claudius). While he was certainly worshipped as a god after his death there is also some evidence that he was worshipped as a god during his lifetime at Colchester and elsewhere in other provinces. This was never acceptable in Rome or Italy where an emperor could only be honoured as a *divus* on his death when subsequently he was worshipped with sacrifices in the same manner as other gods.

The Republic, and later the Empire, had adopted with some modification the Greek Pantheon of major deities but had added to them its own local ones. The *Lares* and *Penates* were groups of deities who protected individual families; every Roman family had its own particular guardian *Lar* - the *Lar Familiaris* - to protect the household. In addition *Lares Compitales* guarded crossroads and neighbourhoods and were honoured four times a year in the cultic rite of the *Compitalia*, while *Lares Praestites* were the guardians of the city of Rome and the Roman state. Although initially different *Lares* and *Penates* were worshiped together in household shrines and in time the *Penates* became conflated with the *Lares*. *Janus*, the god of beginnings, doorways and endings, was only a minor deity but effigies of him were, like the *Lares*, found in most households. In 380AD Theodosius replaced polytheism as the state religion with Nicene Christianity; despite this the the worship of *Janus* and the *Lares* continued to be seen until the early 5th century AD.

Under successive emperors Rome was generally sympathetic to the religions of the peoples it conquered. This was particularly the

case in the army which comprised not only Roman citizens but also soldiers from the conquered territories who brought their own gods with them. With the expansion of the empire literally hundreds of local gods unofficially entered the Roman Pantheon from the conquered territories and were often adopted by the soldiers who were stationed in them; a good example of this was the god *Antenociticus* known only in northern Britain who was adopted by an auxiliary cohort on Hadrian's Wall.

An excellent example of the toleration shown to subject peoples, and their beliefs was the treatment of Jews. Following the Jewish War of 69AD many towns and villages in Judea were subjected to massacres; after the fall of Jerusalem its inhabitants and those in large areas of Judea were killed or taken into slavery and subsequently many were executed in the triumphal games held by Vespasian and Titus. Despite this the Jews of Rome and the cities of the diaspora who had not taken part in the revolt were unaffected; except often they had more to fear from the native populations than from the Roman authorities; the latter frequently had to prevent mob action against them. After the war a punitive tax – the *Fiscus Iudaicus*¹ – was levied on all Jews throughout the empire but they were allowed to practice their religion unhindered.

There were a number of notable exceptions to the toleration shown to other religions. In general Egyptian deities and their cultic worship were viewed with distaste both by the Roman population and

¹ Strictly speaking the *Fiscus Iudaicus* was the fiscal arm of the Roman bureaucracy charged with collecting the tax but it has become common to refer to the tax by this name.

by the authorities and the Druidic cults in Gaul and Britain were slated for extermination; this was not only because of the Druid's bellicose influence on their populations, but also because of the practice of human sacrifice.

The Emperor Hadrian is credited with creating a *Casus Belli* during his tour of the Eastern empire in 131AD by attempting to impose Hellenisation on the Jews of Judea and in 132AD they rose in revolt under the leadership of Simon bar Kochba. After his defeat Jews were forbidden access to Jerusalem which became a Roman city and renamed *Aelia Capitolina*; a temple to *Iupiter Capitolinus* was built on the ruins of Herod's Temple. Extreme penalties, which could include death, were exacted empire wide for all Jewish religious practices including circumcision, Torah study and Sabbath observance; these prohibitions however soon lapsed and Jewish worship resumed as before with Roman acceptance.

The well being of the city and the empire was considered to be dependent on the proper performance of ancient traditional rites in honour of local and national deities. Provided they were observed then in most cases the Roman authorities allowed the populace to worship their own deities without interference. *Religio* was the term used to define an ancient custom of worship of an established god or gods by a cult, while *Superstitio* was the term used to define the worship of new gods - usually foreign imports. The traditional *religio* of Rome was also more specifically a requirement that its citizens honour the established gods of Rome with sacrifices, defined by Cicero as the *cultus deorum* (veneration of the gods).

The practice of a *superstitio* could be considered *maiestas*,

usually defined as *contemnere deos* or contempt for the gods, but could be translated as atheism, it was often (but not always) illegal. The deeply held religious beliefs, one might say superstitious nature, of the Roman populace meant that natural disasters, as well as man made ones, were nearly always blamed on an intervention by the gods, for example the loss of the legion's eagles by Varus, the great fire, etc. These malign interventions could be prevented by strict observance of the cultic practices mandated by ancient usage. Beneficial interventions could be sought by similar cultic practices.

Judaism (unlike the Christian cult) recognised the possible existence of gods other than *Yahweh*, only circumscribing their worship within Jerusalem, and possibly Judea, and by Jews.² The continuation of their ancient cultic practices by 'god-fearers'³ was condoned and encouraged by inter-testamental Judaism. Jews were given 'legal atheist' status, legal toleration, and exemption from the need to participate in local sacrifices by Julius Caesar; instead offerings on behalf of the Emperor were made until 69AD at the temple in Jerusalem.

The wellbeing of the city and the empire was believed to be dependent on the proper performance of these ancient traditional rites. Provided they were observed, then in most cases the Roman authorities allowed the populace to worship their own deities without interference. It was the very fact that Christianity forbade its converts from continuing these practices that caused it to be viewed with such

² Josephus claimed Herod attended civic ceremonies out of respect without actively participating in sacrifice. (Josephus: *A.J.* 14.388).

³ God-Fearers were gentiles attracted to the practice of Judaism and believers in *Yahweh*. They were not full proselytes who had to renounce other gods and undergo complete acceptance of *Torah* including circumcision.

opprobrium both by the Roman authorities and by the general Roman populace. This contempt for the gods was exacerbated by the proselytising zeal of the Christian cult which was attempting to convert pagans from their traditional worship in defiance of the Claudian edict against proselytising⁴. We know from the letters of Pliny that in the reign of Trajan the mere profession of being a Christian was a capital offence, but that an act of sacrificing to the local gods was sufficient to cause the charge to be dropped.

Christianity was 'legalised' in 311AD by Galerius and complete religious freedom was granted to all citizens by Constantine and Licinius in the Edict of Milan in 313AD. Polytheism however remained the state cult and the Nicene form of Catholic Christianity was not declared the state religion of the empire until 380AD by Theodosius. Polytheistic worship continued to be practised until well into the fifth century despite increasing attempts to suppress it by what was then a state church.

⁴ issued circa 41AD

Selected further reading:

Barclay J.M.G. 2014. "Jews" and "Christians" in the Eyes of Roman Authors C. 100CE', in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to Write Their History*, ed. by Peter J. Tomson and Joshua Schartz (Boston: Leiden Brill), pp.313-26

Glover, T. R. (1909) *The Conflict of religions in the Early Roman Empire*, Kindle. Cambridge, Project Gutenberg [Online]. Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/39092> (Accessed 31 January 2002).*

*Note this is an old book and there are a number of anachronisms in it!
Rives, J. B. (2007) *Religion in the Roman Empire*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Reference Material:

Beard, M., North, J. and Price, S. (1998) *Religions of Rome, Volume I & II* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, vol. 1.

Claudius, 'I 151 The Letter of Claudius to the Alexandrians', in *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, ed. by Victor A. Tchericover and Alexander Fuks, 3 vols. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press), 36-55

This gives an excellent view of the attitude of the Roman authorities to other religions, especially Judaism, in the empire.

Josephus, Flavius, 'The Antiquities of the Jews', *Loeb Classical Library* <http://www.loebclassics.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/josephus-jewish_antiquities/1930/pb_LCL242.3.xml>

Josephus, Flavius, 'The Jewish War', *Loeb Classical Library* <http://www.loebclassics.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/josephus-jewish_war/1927/pb_LCL203.3.xml>

(If you have the time and the patience Josephus' works referencing Rome are well worth studying.)

LaPiana, G. 1927. 'Foreign Groups in Rome during the First Centuries of the Empire', *Harvard Theological Review*, 20, pp.183-403

Pliny the Younger, 'Pliny the Younger, Letters', *Loeb Classical Library* <http://www.loebclassics.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/pliny_younger-letters/1969/pb_LCL055.3.xml>