

Christianity in the Roman Empire

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In 251 C.E., a massive plague struck the Roman Empire killing up to 5000 people a day. This plague came during a period of political and social problems known as the “Crisis of the Third Century.”¹ St. Cyprian in “St. Cyprian on Epidemic Disease in the Roman Empire” used Christianity to explain this epidemic and the associated problems.² In *The Influence of Christianity upon the Roman Empire*, Arthur McGiffert describes the same plague as St. Cyprian confirming most of the facts included in the “Source from the Past,” but disputes St. Cyprian’s claims that the plague was caused by the Christian god and was a positive event for Roman Christians. McGiffert provides evidence that the importance of Christianity in the Roman Empire has been greatly exaggerated by St. Cyprian and other scholars.³ Overall, St. Cyprian’s writings present an accurate picture of life in the Roman Empire during the third century C.E. and describe the effects of large-scale disease.

In the source, “St. Cyprian on Epidemic Disease in the Roman Empire,” everything is attributed to Christianity. According to Cyprian, the very symptoms of the plague served as a “validation of the Christian faith”, basically because of the way Christians are supposed to react to the “gift of the times.”⁴ St. Cyprian wrote this source when the disease struck the empire in 251 C.E. to defend Christianity against the imperial authorities. Roman authorities claimed Christians and their rejection of the pagan gods were the cause of the epidemic. Because St. Cyprian was a bishop, he felt compelled to defend Christianity against this accusation. Even though he acknowledged the epidemic did not discriminate and that many Christians were dying because of the rampant illness, St. Cyprian’s predisposition caused him to state that “for the

¹ Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *The Influence of Christianity Upon the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 28-49.

² Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert Ziegler, eds, *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 244.

³ McGiffert, *The Influence of Christianity*, 28-49.

⁴ Bentley and Ziegler, *Traditions and Encounters*, 244.

servants of God it is a welcome event, [whereas it] is a pestilence for the Jews and the pagans and the enemies of Christ.”⁵ This is most likely because he felt Christians would go to heaven when they died whereas the others would not. It must have been easy for him to state that being affected with the disease was a welcome event for some, considering when he wrote this source he was not one of the people suffering from it. His position could have changed if he were suddenly struck with loosened bowels or fever, as he described others suffering from the plague to have. He goes on in the source to state that “the faithful receive protection, while the faithless receive retribution.”⁶ However, this statement serves as a contradiction to the previous acknowledgement that both believers and non-believers are falling victims. His argument that Christians were supposed to be protected is weakened by the fact that so many caught the plague and died. This inconsistency demonstrates Saint Cyprian was not focused on documenting the plague factually, but was so focused on glorifying and defending Christianity that he did not even bother to make sure his statements were logical.

Arthur Cushman McGiffert’s work reveals that it is not unusual for people to assume that Christianity had a constructive impact on the Roman Empire, but that these people have nothing substantial to back up their assumptions. He shows that Christianity had little influence in the formation of the Roman Empire and in its growth through the Mediterranean sea.⁷ St. Cyprian’s writings claim that Christianity provided followers some relief against the plague, but provides little evidence to back this up.⁸ According to McGiffert, Christianity was among the numerous religions that drew Roman interest and conflicted with Paganism.⁹ Because of this, as seen in the

⁵ Bentley and Ziegler, *Traditions and Encounters*, 244.

⁶ Bentley and Ziegler, *Traditions and Encounters*, 244.

⁷ McGiffert, *The Influence of Christianity*, 29.

⁸ Bentley and Ziegler, *Traditions and Encounters*, 244.

⁹ McGiffert, *The Influence of Christianity*, 42-43.

introduction to Cyprian's document, Christians needed to defend it against the attacks from the followers of other religions and against the pagan Roman government. Arthur McGiffert also states that Christianity claimed "to offer a solution of the great problems of the ages,"¹⁰ which is exactly what St. Cyprian states when he claims that Christians were "being liberated from the world" and "the just are called to refreshment."¹¹ These few key similarities are important because they are enough to show that while the source by St. Cyprian is not exactly accurate in terms of the ideas it expresses, it is an accurate representation of how Roman Christians felt about their religion in the third century C.E.

The two sources also show major differences. While the primary source document does claim Christianity has the answers to everything, McGiffert explains that this really was not the case. For example, some scholars have claimed that the end of Roman slavery and gladiatorial combat, as well as the increase in charity work undertaken by Roman people are changes caused by wide-scale conversion to Christianity. However, they neglect to delve in further and notice that there is really no direct cause and effect relationship in these areas. Christians really did not protest slavery, gladiatorial combat was ended by a decree from the emperor and was not widely protested by the Christian church, and charity work was encouraged by paganism as well as Christianity.¹² McGiffert also explains that "bitter hostility was aroused"¹³ as well as spite in regards to the new developing religion; however, St. Cyprian conveniently left these out. These differences are important because they serve to highlight St. Cyprian's biases even further. I believe that the primary source document is accurate in its picture of the times but not in its opinion that Christianity answered everything. The document's accurate picture makes it

¹⁰ McGiffert, *The Influence of Christianity*, 44.

¹¹ Bentley and Ziegler, *Traditions and Encounters*, 244.

¹² McGiffert, *The Influence*, 30, 32, 34.

¹³ McGiffert, *The Influence*, 43.

important because it explains to the reader how devoted people of the time were to defending their positions and religion. Its inaccurate opinion is also important because, since it was widely circulated, it indoctrinated many others to share that position. We see this in Arthur McGiffert's source because it states that many people today share the opinion that Christianity was beneficial to the Roman Empire.¹⁴

St. Cyprian's document demonstrates accuracy, not in using Christianity as an explanation for the plague but in providing readers with information on beliefs and arguments of Roman Christians in the third century C.E. He provides us with evidence of how people thought and what was truly happening in 251 C.E. Arthur Cushman McGiffert's document is of course accurate in every sense of the word because, unlike St. Cyprian, he had access to a wide range of sources on the period. McGiffert explains how St. Cyprian, and many other writers, assumed Christianity offered answers about the success of the Roman Empire. Although he lacked a wide range of evidence, St. Cyprian's observations of the plague prove useful to modern readers, and his explanations show how Roman Christians in the third century C.E. argued in support of their religion. *The Influence of Christianity upon the Roman Empire* helps to prove the importance of "St. Cyprian on Epidemic Disease in the Roman Empire" by giving evidence that, although Cyprian's work had some flaws in cause, it provided accurate information on Roman Christian beliefs and the plague itself.

¹⁴ McGiffert, *The Influence*, 28.

Works Cited

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