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Article

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Modern Christianity's Forgotten Roots

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Why do you do the things you do? Why do you believe the things you believe?
What is the origin of your religious beliefs?

Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th-century Danish writer and religious philosopher, wrote that the "Christianity of the New Testament simply does not exist." He questioned how popular Christianity had strayed so far from the way of life described and practiced in the Bible. Is it possible that today's Christianity is fundamentally different from the teachings of the apostles? Some scholars and serious students of the Bible have recognized and acknowledged that the practices of the early Church varied greatly from those of today.

Norbert Brox, professor of early church history at the University of Regensburg, Germany, describes the viewpoint of the early Church: "Thus the first [Christian] communities were groups that formed within Judaism . . . Christians believed as before in the God of Israel: their Bible was the Bible of the Jews . . . They continued to observe (as Jesus did) the Jewish practice of temple worship and law (Acts 2.46; 10.14), and gave outsiders the impression of being a Jewish sect (Acts 24.5, 14; 28.22), not a new religion. They themselves probably also simply thought of themselves as Jews" (*A Concise History of the Early Church*, Continuum, New York, 1996, p. 4).

How did this transformation in the practices of Christianity come about?

Major shifts in Christianity

Some within the Christian congregations, representing themselves as faithful ministers of Christ, gradually began to introduce heretical teachings even in the time of the apostles. Paul described such men and their methods: "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness . . ." ([2 Corinthians 11:13-15](#)).

These teachers appeared to represent Christ at a time when the masses of humanity lacked any significant education. To the unschooled believers of that time, their teachings probably seemed reasonable; they sounded right. Yet these teachers were really instruments of deception in Satan's hands, used to lead others astray. Many may not have even realized their own errors and misguided motives.

Over time the damage was done. The apostle John, apparently the last survivor among the 12 original disciples, wrote of one false minister who had risen to power within the Church. This man was boldly rejecting John's emissaries and excommunicating faithful members (3 John 9-10). With John's writings, the books and letters that would form the New Testament were complete.

With his passing, however, reliable eyewitness accounts of events and changes in the Church largely ceased. We are left with confusing and contradictory accounts for the next several centuries.

Persecution leads to changes

Part of the lack of information about this time stems from persecution of the Church. Under Emperor Nero (A.D. 54-68), Christians in Rome were blamed for burning the city, and many were killed. Later the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96) demanded that all citizens of the empire worship him as a god. Christians and Jews alike who, in obedience to God's commandments, refused to comply with the edict were vigorously persecuted. For several centuries waves of persecution engulfed Christianity and Judaism.

In the first and second centuries Jews revolted against Roman rule. The second rebellion in particular brought persecution of Jews and Judaism. Emperor Hadrian (117-138), upon capturing Jerusalem, razed it and built a new city that Jews were forbidden even to enter. He also banned circumcision and observance of the Sabbath.

Professor Brox describes the effect on the Church: "The Jewish Christians in Palestine had been driven out in the First Jewish War (66-70) but then had returned to Jerusalem; however, after the Bar Kokhba revolt, the Second Jewish War against the Romans (132-135), they had to leave the land because, as Jews, they had been circumcised, and all Jews were now banned on pain of death. So for the moment that meant the end of this [Jerusalem] church" (Brox, p. 19).

From the scanty historical records it appears that, to avoid punishment, a significant number of Christians began to avoid identification with Judaism during this time of intense persecution of Jews. The more visible portion of Christianity began a significant transition from the teachings of the apostles to an anti-Jewish religious philosophy. Former practices held in common with Judaism rapidly began to wane as new customs crept into the Church. Few summoned up the courage to face continual persecution for remaining faithful to the customs handed down by the apostles of Christ.

The Passover-Easter debate

The church historian Eusebius, reporting on the Council of Nicaea (325), describes a debate going back to the second century between Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John who urged Christians to continue to keep the Passover as a memorial of Christ's *death*, and Anicetus, bishop of Rome (155-166), who advocated a celebration of Christ's *resurrection* on Easter Sunday. Later, bishop Victor I of Rome (189-199) issued an ultimatum that all were "to follow the Sunday practice of the Roman church and most other churches" (Brox, p. 124, emphasis added throughout).

At Nicaea the new custom of Easter won out over Passover. The Roman emperor Constantine decreed that those who refused to follow the Roman church's lead were heretics and to be excommunicated.

His resulting letter showed the depth of his feelings regarding practices he considered "Jewish."

"It appeared an unworthy thing," he wrote, "that in the celebration of this most holy feast [Easter] we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul . . . Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd: for we have received from our Savior a different way . . .

"Strive and pray continually that the purity of your soul may not seem in anything to be sullied by fellowship with the custom of these most wicked men . . . All should unite in desiring that which sound reason appears to demand, avoiding all participation in the perjured conduct of the Jews" (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3, 18-19, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Hendrickson, Grand Rapids, 1979, second series, Vol. 1, pp. 524-525).

Constantine endorses 'Christianity'

Constantine's reign as emperor (306-337) dramatically changed the direction Christianity would take. Under his rule, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and he was baptized (albeit on his deathbed).

But what was the nature of the Christianity he endorsed?

By now, much had already changed. Charles Guignebert, professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Paris, observes: "Contemplate the [Christian Church](#) at the beginning of the fourth century, therefore, and some difficulty will be experienced in recognizing in her the community of Apostolic times, or rather, *we shall not be able to recognize it at all . . .*" (*The Early History of Christianity*, Twayne, New York, 1927).

Consider also British historian Paul Johnson's findings regarding Constantine: "He himself appears to have been a sun-worshipper, one of a number of late-pagan cults which had observances in common with the Christians. Thus the followers of Isis adored a madonna nursing her holy child; the cult of Attis and Cybele celebrated a day of blood and fasting, followed by the Hilaria resurrection-feast, a day of joy, on 25 March; the elitist Mithraics, many of whom were senior army officers, ate a sacred meal. Constantine was almost certainly a Mithraic, and his triumphal arch, built after his 'conversion', testifies to the Sun-god, or 'unconquered sun.'

"Many Christians did not make a clear distinction between this sun-cult and their own. They referred to Christ 'driving his chariot across the sky': they held their services on Sunday, knelt towards the East and had their nativity-feast on 25 December, the birthday of the sun at the winter solstice. During the later pagan revival under the Emperor Julian many Christians found it easy to apostasize because of this confusion; . . . Constantine never abandoned sun-worship and kept the sun on his coins . . .

"[Constantine] no doubt shared the view, popular among professional soldiers, that all religious cults should be respected, to appease their respective gods . . . Many of his ecclesiastical arrangements indicate that he wanted a state Church, with the clergy as civil servants. His own role was not wholly removed from that of the pagan God-emperor-as witness the colossal heads and statues of himself with which he littered his empire-though he preferred the idea of a priest-king.

"How could the Christian Church, apparently quite willingly, accommodate this weird megalomaniac in its theocratic system? Was there a conscious bargain? Which side benefited most from this unseemly marriage between Church and State? Or, to put it another way, did the empire surrender to Christianity, or did Christianity prostitute itself to the empire?" (*A History of Christianity*, Atheneum, New York, 1976, pp. 67-69).

From Sabbath to Sunday

Constantine's affection for sun worship led him to formalize a change in the weekly day of rest for Christianity. "In 321 Constantine introduced Sunday as a weekly day of rest for the society which he had Christianized as part of his religious policy, and on it no work was done . . . The rest from work on the Christian Sunday was derived from the Jewish sabbath commandment, *with which Sunday intrinsically had no connection* . . . So the present-day Sunday ultimately arises out of the Christian Lord's Day or day of resurrection through the state legislation of late antiquity" (Brox, p. 105).

For a time some in what was now a largely transformed Christianity retained the Sabbath and other festivals kept by Jesus and the apostles. This was not to last. Says Robin Fox, lecturer in ancient history at Oxford University, "In the 430s, the Christian Council of Laodicea ruled in detail against Christian observance of the Jewish Sabbath, their acceptance of unleavened bread from Jews and their keeping of Jewish festivals" (*Pagans and Christians*, Knopf, New York, 1987, p. 482).

Transformed by paganism

While the practices of the apostles were being banned, traditions from other religions were being incorporated and relabeled as Christian. "Subtly, so subtly that the bishops themselves had not seen them, the old gods had entered their churches like the air of the Mediterranean. And they live still in Christian ritual, in the iconography and the festivals of Christianity . . . The ancient sign of life, the *ankh*, which the gods had carried in their sculptures for thousands of years, was easily transformed into the Christian cross; the figure of Isis nursing her child Horus, *Isis Lactans*, became the figure of the Virgin with Jesus at her breast . . .

"At Rome, Romulus and Remus were swapped for the biblical saints Peter and Paul. And still in the fifth century, the Pope had to stop the early morning congregation of St Peter's from walking up the church steps backwards so as not to offend Sol, the rising sun god. Similarly, 25 December, now Christ's birthday, was also the day of Sol Invictus' festival . . . celebrated by

cutting green branches and hanging little lights on them, and presents were given out in the god's name. Sol's weekly festival Sol-day-Sunday-became the Christian Sabbath . . ." (John Romer, *Testament: The Bible and History*, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1988, pp. 230-231).

To expand the universal church's power and influence, clergy welcomed many new converts- and many new practices-into the church. Professor Guignebert describes this process: "Now at the beginning of the fifth century, the ignorant and the semi-Christians thronged into the Church in numbers . . . They had forgotten *none of their pagan customs* . . . The bishops of that period had to content themselves with redressing, as best they could, and in experimental fashion, the shocking *malformations* of the Christian faith which they perceived around them . . .

"[Properly instructing converts] was out of the question; they had to be content with teaching them no more than the symbol of baptism and then baptizing them en masse, postponing until a later date the task of eradicating their superstitions, which they preserved intact . . . This 'later date' never arrived, and the Church adapted to herself, as well as she could, them and their customs and beliefs. On their side, they were content to dress their *paganism* in a Christian *cloak*" (p. 208-210).

Guignebert describes the resulting bizarre synthesis that now formed Christianity:

"The *ancient festivals* [are now] kept as *holidays* and celebrated in the country parts, and the Church can only neutralize their effect by turning them to account for her own profit. There is nothing stranger, from this point of view, than the instructions given by Gregory the Great to the monk Augustine, his missionary to England.

"He is to transform the temples into churches, after they have been ceremonially cleansed; and to replace the devil-sacrifices by processions in honor of some saint, with an offering of oxen to the glory of God, and the distribution of the flesh among the congregation. Moreover, the king of East Anglia, Redwald, after his baptism and Christian confession, is careful to keep opposite the altar in his church at which mass is celebrated, another altar where the sacrifices demanded by the ancient gods are carried out" (p. 214).

He observes: "It is sometimes very difficult to tell exactly from which pagan rite a particular Christian rite is derived, but it remains certain that the spirit of pagan ritualism became by

degrees impressed upon Christianity, to such an extent that at last the *whole of it* might be found *distributed through its ceremonies*" (p. 121).

What does God say?

During these early centuries, Christianity radically transformed. Ecclesiastical leaders ignored God's instruction. They disregarded God when He warned: "Take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall *not* worship the LORD your God in that way . . . Whatever I command you, *be careful to observe it*; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" ([Deuteronomy 12:30-32](#)).

The apostles understood God's instruction and steadfastly resisted the kind of changes that later infiltrated the Church. After all, this instruction was part of "the Holy Scriptures," the only Bible they had at the time ([2 Timothy 3:14-17](#)).

Although many blatantly non-Christian practices were toned down in later centuries, even a cursory research into many practices still popular reveals their roots.

But what is equally regrettable is that, by abandoning the practices of Jesus and the apostles, so many are missing out on a fuller understanding of true Christianity. There are still Christians who faithfully follow the practices and teachings of Jesus and the apostles who enjoyed the blessing of discerning God's great plan for men and women everywhere. They have discovered the "narrow" way of life that few find ([Matthew 7:14](#)). GN