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## A Comparative Study of Religions

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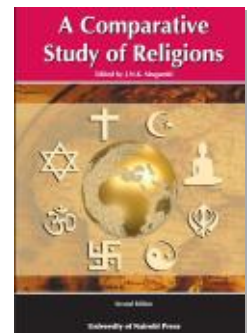
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# The Religious and Cultural Background of Early Christianity

*G.E.M. Ogutu*

## Introduction

The next three chapters discuss Christianity, one of the religions of mankind. Religion can be a social cement and an impulse towards renewal; it can intimidate people and force them to reform, or it can help them to act independently. It is in the light of these functions of religion that we shall present Christianity in world history.

Early in January 1964, Pope Paul IV visited Jerusalem for three days. What amazed the onlookers and those who followed that trip through radio and television was the wild enthusiasm, which greeted the Pope. People had come from all over the world and more from the Near East and the Mediterranean lands to join the pontiff in his historic pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The Via Dolorosa was so crowded that His Holiness could not pause at the stations of the Cross but had to force his way to the place of the skull. We cannot adequately comprehend that narrow way along which Jesus fell seven times carrying his cross until he reached the site for crucifixion, without first talking about the world in which Christianity emerged and the social aspects of the community in which it sprang up. These are the concerns of this chapter. The chapter will look into:

1. The Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds in which Christianity emerged;
2. The political climate in Palestine at the time;

3. The social and religious characteristic of the people among whom Jesus found his followers;
4. The reason why the founding of what turned out to be a major world religion was inevitable in Palestine at the time.

## **The Jewish World**

Christianity arose in Palestine among Jewish people, where Jesus lived and died. It is within the framework of the Jewish world view that the teachings of Jesus were delivered. The disciples of Jesus also received the teachings as Jews. We find that when Paul was going about preaching to the Gentiles he often started at the Jewish Synagogue in the town where he visited. This explains why we need to understand the social and religious situation of the Jews in order to understand the founding of Christianity.

Palestine, the Promised Land of the Jews, lay at the crossroad between Egypt and Assyria and between Arabia and Asia Minor. Because of its position, Palestine was annexed by almost every nation that came to power in the region, for example, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Macedonian Greek and finally the Romans. In 63 BC the Romans took Jerusalem and are said to have defiled the Temple. It was under Roman rule that we find Palestine at the time Christ was born and right through his life on earth.

Historical records tell us that the Jews were not an easy people for the Romans to govern. This was because of their exclusive religion, which gave no room for other religions except the Lord of Hosts. In order to rule these people the Romans had no choice but to respect their religion centered on the Law, or Torah.

In the course of their history, the Law became the symbol of the Jewish national spirit. The strong desire to study and interpret the law accurately led to the emergence of the scribe or teacher of the law, who had the responsibility of both preserving and interpreting the law.

We need to emphasize that, for the religious world of the Jews, the Torah gave Judaism its identity, defined the privileged position of the Jews as a chosen people and gave them their self-awareness. But their contact and interaction with the gentiles (non-Jewish people) led to uncertainty, calling for a re-examination with their attachment to the Torah. Like any conquered people, the Jews insisted on intensification of the norms of the Torah. It is because of this problem that we find the role played by the Essenes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees of special significance.

The Essenes were concerned about priestly purity, which they sought to realize in the wilderness. They shrank from contact with the world and practiced strict observance of the laws of the Sabbath.

The Pharisees, unlike the Essenes, practiced the observances in everyday life, seeking to put the Torah into effect in normal life. This was not practicable in the eyes of the Essenes.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, were from the priestly caste and were liberal in both political and cultural matters. This made them different from the Pharisees who were enemies of anything foreign. Sadducees respected the written law only. Thus, the common denominator to the Jewish understanding of their world was that their history was a gradual revelation of the purpose of Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts. Conquests, famines, and whatever calamity befell the land was divine punishment.

By the time of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Jews were found in various cities of the Mediterranean world. These Jews of the Diaspora (Scatter) erected synagogues wherever they settled. It was at these synagogues that they taught the Law and the prophets. These synagogues played an important role in the spread of the Christian faith.

## **Greco-Roman World**

The Greeks were a very proud people. To them, the Greek was the only man. They produced such great philosophers as Plato (427–347 BC) and Aristotle (384–322BC). Their thought pattern based on the Greek city-state was aristocratic and racist. To them all non-Greeks were barbarians (inferior).

However, all this changed with the conquests of Alexander the Great between 334 and 323 BC. As a result of the establishment of the Greek empire incorporating Palestine, a cosmopolitan society emerged. The Greek found himself lost in the empire, while their gods, found themselves in competition with other gods including the Lord of Hosts. Their rules of conduct also conflicted with the customs of others, including the Jewish Torah. In spite of these conflicts, the teachings of Greek philosophers, particularly Plato, contributed to the evolution of some of the Christian ideas.

It was Plato who evolved the idea of two worlds – the material and the immaterial. He also talked about immortality and the pre-existence of the soul, as well as the idea of the good. His teaching about the divine artisan who took formless matter and gave it form runs through the teachings of the Christians centuries later.

When the Greek empire declined, the Romans took over. As we have indicated, the Romans did not impose their religion on the Jewish people. They were known for their wise administration, unity of the empire and ease of communication. Their legal code and interest in practical works, moral behavior and human acts were crucial. Records tell us that millions of people enjoyed the benefits of Roman civilization; and the chief of these benefits was the Roman Peace, the Pax Romana.

However, from the religious point of view, the Roman religion was no more than a collection of superstitions, combining gods from Italy, Greece, Egypt and elsewhere. For most people, religion was a matter of guarding against misfortune by offering prayers and sacrifices to a variety of divine and semi-divine

figures including the Roman Emperor. It is in this kind of empire that Christianity emerged.

## **Social Aspects of Christianity**

(This section makes references to the New Testament. You may like to have a Bible beside you as you read).

Christianity is sometimes referred to as one of the renewal movements within Judaism, which existed in Syria and Palestine between AD 30 and AD 70. The pillars of early Christianity were traveling apostles, prophets and disciples who moved from place to place and who relied mostly on groups of sympathizers; it was these wandering, homeless charismatics that handed down what later became Christianity. Their role as charismatics – that is, people with a special charisma that draws others to them – was grounded in a call over which they had no control.

The people who followed Jesus are identified with homelessness, lack of family, lack of possessions and lack of protection. Those who were called left home (Mark 1:16, 10:28) followed Jesus, and like him became homeless. They not only left their families behind but also hated them (Luke 14:26). Lack of possessions was a normal thing (Matthew 10:17). The charismatics had no protection but relied on the Holy Spirit (Matthew 10:17).

The picture that we see of these people is that they were people released from the everyday ties of the world. They had left home, wives and children, left their families to bury their dead, and who took the lilies and birds as their model of ideal way of life. These were outsiders: the sick and the crippled, prostitutes and good for nothings, tax collectors and prodigal sons.

From the foregoing, four factors make up the social aspects of Christianity, namely socioeconomic, socio-ecology, and socio-culture. Social rootlessness was a key socioeconomic factor. This was a normal phenomenon within Judaism found among the prophetic movements, the Essenes and followers of Jesus.

Therefore, at the time of Jesus there were many socially rootless people in Palestine.

The socio-ecological factor comes into play when we consider the fact that the movement founded by Jesus was basically a countryside movement. Jesus is found in the countryside of Galilee (Mark 14:70), the village of the Caesarea, Philippi (Mark 8:27), the region of Tyre (Mark 7:24) and the country of the Garesenes (Mark 5:1). It is only towards the end that we find this renewal movement heading for Jerusalem.

The Jewish community was a theocracy, that is, it was subject to the rule of God. The movement founded by Jesus was also a radical theocracy, which proclaimed the imminent rule of God, which could be interpreted to mean the end of all other rules, including that of the Romans and the priests. The tensions between earthly structures of government furthered the longing for the Kingdom of God.

The final factor is the socio-cultural. We said earlier in this chapter, that the Torah gave the Jews their identity. The interpretation of the Torah led to tensions between Jewish and Hellenistic culture. The Jews resisted assimilation by foreign cultures and this is what led to strong resistance to domination. The crisis in Palestinian Jewish society led to the search for new patterns of religious and social life. It was such a pattern that early Christianity attempted to provide.

### **Activity**

1. Explain how Judaism and Greco-Roman ideas influenced the development of Christianity.
2. Describe in your own words the social aspects important in the development of Christianity.