3 Christianity 100BC–1200AD

The Greeks may have been the first to realise the worth of individual liberty, the Romans the value of discipline and authority, but in both these fields the spirit of man is doomed to anarchy and waste unless inspired by faith.1 The third great pillar of European civilisation is the Christian religion.

So why did Christianity succeed?

The Gods of Rome were really the Gods of Greece transported and given Roman names. Up to the end of the first century AD traditional Roman religion had an important role to play. It provided, through its rituals, a sense of order and cohesion and was essential in the building of patriotism. The weakness of this religion was that it could do nothing to relieve concern about a world in which everything depended upon oppressive, whimsical chance or fate. It could not fill the vacuum in the soul. So while retaining the forms and attending the ceremonies of the official cults, many people turned elsewhere in the search for strength to endure life on earth and find a happy life in the hereafter. Some sought the answers in astrology. Others turned to the many mystery cults coming to Rome from the Middle East. And thus an epoch began, lasting until the seventeenth century, when people’s chief anxieties concerned the after-life.2

Magic might alter one’s fate, but initiation lifted one beyond, in order to ‘be saved’ through personal union with a Saviour God who was believed, in many cases, himself to have died and risen again. The initiations leading to this end provided an intense emotional experience. Purifications, sacramental banquets, purged human sin through ecstasy (the soul leaving the body) and enthousiasm (the God entering and dwelling within his worshippers). Through the medium of these experiences each Mystery religion gave its initiates comforting promises of immortality. The knowledge that was sought now had to come not through reason but by revelation through union with God, for that alone could provide the secret which would defeat the stars, or chance.3 And thus Belief came to supplant Reason.

Among the more famous of these Mystery religions was Manichaeanism, which sought to get round the problem of how a Good Creator could allow Evil to exist by postulating the co-existence of good and evil powers.
A much larger and more popular cult was that of the Egyptian goddess Isis, with its theme of death and resurrection. According to Egyptian legend the husband of Isis, Osiris, a mythical King and bringer of Egyptian civilisation, was murdered by his brother Seth. His dismembered body was reassembled by Isis who posthumously conceived their son Horus, who fought and overcame Seth. Osiris was then resurrected as King of the Underworld and a symbol of immortality.

The cult of Isis thus promised immortality in an afterlife. The cult was open to all people – Roman citizens, freedmen and slaves. But Isis was, above all, the woman’s goddess, ‘Holy Mother’, and her statues would usually be with the infant Horus in her arms.

A third cult was Mithraism, whose origin was Persian. Mithraism stressed the struggle in the world between the forces of good and evil. The hero of the good, and identified with the light or the Sun, was Mithra. Mithraism – and its theme of struggle – particularly appealed to the military in the Empire.

There were many resemblances between these Mystery cults and Christianity, which sought to answer the same needs – mutual support, posthumous guarantees, a protector who was above Fate, a privileged status such as the world could not give, and ritual and revelation. But there were also great differences between them:

The belief among Christians that the Saviour would come again caused them to view their earthly lives as something transient, that what they did on earth should really be related to the life hereafter.

Second, whereas the Mystery cults provided hope for the individual, Christians believed that Jesus died, not to save any one person, but Mankind as a whole.

Third, Christianity, being originally a sect of Judaism, was uncompromisingly monotheistic. The Mystery cults were not exclusive. People often belonged to several, and they did not demand unconditional allegiance. This gave the devotees of Christianity a unique confidence and fanaticism.

Fourth, again from Judaism, came other pillars of Christianity: the principle of authority; the belief that its followers formed a chosen Race, transcending tribal or national or linguistic divisions; and a binding code of moral conduct, continually stressed in preaching.