WHY THE ORIENTAL RELIGIONS SPREAD.*

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WHEN, during the fourth century, the weakened empire split asunder like an overburdened scale whose beam is broken, this political divorce only perpetuated a moral separation that had existed for a long time. The opposition between the Greco-Oriental and the Latin worlds manifests itself especially in religion and in the attitude taken by the central power toward it.

Occidental paganism was almost exclusively Latin under the empire. After the annexation of Spain, Gaul and Brittany the old Iberian, Celtic and other religions were unable to keep up the unequal struggle against the more advanced religion of the conquerors. The marvelous rapidity with which the literature of the civilizing Romans was accepted by the subject peoples has frequently been pointed out. Its influence was felt in the temples as well as in the forum; it transformed the prayers to the gods as well as the conversation between men. Besides, it was part of the political program of the Csesars to make the adoption of the Roman divinities general, and the government imposed the rules of its sacerdotal law as well as the principles of its public and civil law upon its new subjects. The municipal laws prescribed the election of pontiffs and augurs in common with the judicial duumvirs. In Gaul druidism, with its oral traditions embodied in long poems, perished and disappeared less on account of the police measures directed against it than in consequence of its voluntary relinquishment by the Celts, as soon as they came under the ascendency of Latin culture. In Spain it is difficult to find any traces of the aboriginal religions. Even in Africa, where the Punic religion was far more developed, it maintained itself only by assuming an entirely Roman appearance. Baal became Saturn and Eshmoun Æsculapius. It is doubtful if there was one temple in all the provinces of Italy and Gaul where,

* Translated by A. M. Thielen.
at the time of the disappearance of idolatry, the ceremonies were celebrated according to native rites and in the local idiom. To this exclusive predominance of Latin is due the fact that it remained the only liturgic language of the Occidental Church, which here as in many other cases perpetuated a pre-existing condition and maintained a unity previously established. By imposing her speech upon the inhabitants of Ireland and Germany, Christian Rome simply continued the work of assimilation in the barbarian provinces subject to her influence that she had begun while pagan.¹

In the Orient, however, the churches that are separate from the Greek orthodoxy use, even to-day, a variety of dialects calling to mind the great diversity of races formerly subject to Rome. In those times twenty varieties of speech translated the religious thought of the peoples joined under the domination of the Caesars. At the beginning of our era Hellenism had not yet conquered the uplands of Anatolia,² nor central Syria, nor the divisions of Egypt. Annexation to the empire might retard and in certain regions weaken the power of expansion of Greek civilization, but it could not substitute Latin culture for it³ except around the camps of the legions guarding the frontier and in a very few colonies. It especially benefitted the individuality of each region. The native religions retained all their prestige and independence. In their ancient sanctuaries that took rank with the richest and most famous of the world, a powerful clergy continued to practise ancestral devotions according to barbarian rites, and frequently in a barbarian tongue. The traditional liturgy, everywhere performed with scrupulous respect, remained Egyptian or Semitic, Phrygian or Persian, according to the locality.

Neither pontifical law nor augural science ever obtained credit outside of the Latin world. It is a characteristic fact that the worship of the deified emperors, the only official worship required of every one by the government as a proof of loyalty, should have originated of its own accord in Asia, received its inspiration from the purest monarchic traditions, and revived in form and spirit the veneration accorded to the Diadochi by their subjects.

Not only were the gods of Egypt and Asia never supplanted like those of Gaul or Spain, but they soon crossed the seas and gained worshipers in every Latin province. Isis and Serapis, Cybele and Attis, the Syrian Baals, Sabazius and Mithra were honored by

² Holl, l'olkssprache in Kleinasien, 1908, pp. 250 ff.
³ Hahn, Rom und Romanismus im griechisch-römischen Osten bis auf die Zeit Hadrians. Leipsic, 1906.
brotherhoods of believers as far as the remotest limits of Germany. The Oriental reaction that we perceive from the beginning of our era, in studying the history of art, literature, and philosophy, manifested itself with incomparably greater power in the religious sphere. First, there was a slow infiltration of despised exotic religions, then, toward the end of the first century, the Orontes, the Nile and the Halys, to use the words of Juvenal, flowed into the Tiber, to the great indignation of the old Romans. Finally, a hundred years later, an influx of Egyptian, Semitic and Persian beliefs and conceptions took place that threatened to submerge all that the Greek and Roman genius had laboriously built up. What called forth and permitted this spiritual commotion, of which the triumph of Christianity was the outcome? Why was the influence of the Orient strongest in the religious field? These questions claim our attention. Like all great phenomena of history, this particular one was determined by a number of influences that concurred in producing it. In the mass of half-known particulars that brought it about, certain factors or leading causes, of which every one has in turn been considered the most important, may be distinguished.

If we yielded to the tendency of many excellent minds of to-day and regarded history as the resultant of economic and social forces, it would be easy to show their influence in that great religious movement. The industrial and commercial preponderance of the Orient was manifest, for there were situated the principal centers of production and export. The ever increasing traffic with the Levant induced merchants to establish themselves in Italy, in Gaul, in the Danubian countries, in Africa and in Spain; in some cities they formed real colonies. The Syrian emigrants were especially numerous. Compliant, quick and diligent, they went wherever they expected profit, and their colonies, scattered as far as the north of Gaul, were centers for the religious propaganda of paganism just as the Jewish communities of the Diaspora were for Christian preaching. Italy not only bought her grain from Egypt, she imported men also; she ordered slaves from Phrygia, Cappadocia, Syria and Alexandria to cultivate her depopulated fields and perform the domestic duties in her palaces. Who can tell what influence chambermaids from Antioch or Memphis gained over the minds of their mistresses? At the same time the necessities of war removed officers and men from the Euphrates to the Rhine or to the outskirts of the Sahara, and everywhere they remained faithful to the gods of their faraway country. The requirements of the government transferred functionaries and their clerks, the latter frequently of
servile birth, into the most distant provinces. Finally, the ease of communication, due to the good roads, increased the frequency and extent of travel.

Thus the exchange of products, men and ideas necessarily increased, and it might be maintained that theocracy was a necessary consequence of the mingling of the races, that the gods of the Orient followed the great commercial and social currents, and that their establishment in the Occident was a natural result of the movement that drew the excess population of the Asiatic cities and rural districts into the less thickly inhabited countries.

These reflections, which could be developed at some length, surely show the way in which the Oriental religions spread. It is certain that the merchants acted as missionaries in the seaports and places of commerce, the soldiers on the frontiers and in the capital, the slaves in the city homes, in the rural districts and in public affairs. But while this acquaints us with the means and the agents of the diffusion of those religions, it tells us nothing of the reasons for their adoption by the Romans. We perceive the how, but not the why, of their sudden expansion. Especially imperfect is our understanding of the reasons for the difference between the Orient and the Occident pointed out above.

An example will make my meaning clear. A Celtic divinity, Epona, was held in particular honor as the protectress of horses, as we all know. The Gallic horsemen worshiped her wherever they were cantoned; her monuments have been found scattered from Scotland to Transylvania. And yet, although this goddess enjoyed the same conditions as, for instance, Jupiter Dolichenus whom the cohorts of Commagene introduced into Europe, it does not appear that she ever received the homage of many strangers; it does not appear, above all, that druidism ever assumed the shape of "mysteries of Epona" into which Greeks and Romans would have asked to be initiated. It was too deficient in the intrinsic strength of the Oriental religions, to make proselytes.

Other historians and thinkers of to-day prefer to apply the laws of natural science to religious phenomena; and the theories about the variation of species find an unforeseen application here. It is maintained that the immigration of Orientals, of Syrians in particular, was considerable enough to provoke an alteration and rapid deterioration in the robust Italic and Celtic races. In addition, a social status contrary to nature, and a bad political regime effected

\textsuperscript{4} Tacitus, \textit{Annales}, XIV, 44.

the destruction of the strongest, the extermination of the best and
the ascendency of the worst elements of the population. This multi-
tude, corrupted by deleterious cross-breeding and weakened by bad
selection, became unable to oppose the invasion of the Asiatic chimeras and aberrations. A lowering of the intellectual level and the
disappearance of the critical spirit accompanied the decline of morals
and the weakening of character. In the evolution of beliefs the
triump of the Orient denoted a regression toward barbarism, a
return to the remote origins of faith and to the worship of natural
forces. This is a brief outline of some explanations recently pro-
posed and received with some favor.  

It cannot be denied that souls and morals appear to have be-
come coarser during the Roman decline. Society as a whole was
deplorably lacking in imagination, intellect and taste. It seemed
afflicted with a kind of cerebral anaemia and incurable sterility. The
impaired reason accepted the coarsest superstitions, the most ex-
treme asceticism and the most extravagant theurgy. It resembled
an organism incapable of defending itself against contagion. All
this is partly true; but the theories summarized proceed from an
incorrect conception of things; in reality they are based on the illu-
sion that Asia, under the empire, was inferior to Europe. While
the triumph of the Oriental religions sometimes assumed the ap-
pearance of an awakening of savagery, these religions in reality
represented a more advanced type in the evolution of religious
forms than the ancient national devotions. They were less primitive,
less simple, and, if I may use the expression, provided with more
organs than the old Greco-Roman idolatry. We have indicated this
on previous occasions, and hope to bring it out with perfect clearness
in the course of these studies.

It is hardly necessary to state that a great religious conquest
can be explained only on moral grounds. Whatever part must be
ascribed to the instinct of imitation and the contagion of example,
in the last analysis we are always face to face with a series of indi-
vidual conversions. The mysterious affinity of minds is as much
due to reflection as to the continued and almost unconscious in-
fluence of confused aspirations that produce faith. The obscure
gestation of a new ideal is accomplished with pangs of anguish.
Violent struggles must have disturbed the souls of the masses when
they were torn away from their old ancestral religions, or more
often from indifference, by those exacting gods who demanded a

\* Cf. Stewart Chamberlain, Die Grundlagen des XIX. Jahrhunderts, 3d
ed., Munich, 1901, pp. 296 f.
surrender of the entire person, a devotion in the etymological meaning of the word. The consecration to Isis of the hero of Apuleius was the result of a call, of an appeal, by the goddess who wanted the neophyte to enlist in her sacred militia.\(^7\)

If it is true that every conversion involves a psychological crisis, a transformation of the intimate personality of the individual, this is especially true of the propagation of the Oriental religions. Born outside of the narrow limits of the Roman city, they grew up, frequently in hostility to it, and were international, consequently individual. The bond that formerly kept devotion centered upon the city or the tribe, upon the gens or the family, was broken. In place of the ancient social groups communities of initiates came into existence, who considered themselves brothers no matter where they came from.\(^8\) A god, conceived of as being universal, received every mortal as his child. Whenever these religions had any relation to the state they were no longer called upon to support old municipal or social institutions, but to lend their strength to the authority of a sovereign regarded as the eternal lord of the whole world jointly with God himself. In the circles of the mystics, Asiatics mingled with Romans, and slaves with high functionaries. The adoption of the same faith made the poor freedman the equal, and sometimes the superior, of the decurion and the clarissimus. All submitted to the same rules and participated in the same festivities, in which the distinctions of an aristocratic society and the differences of blood and country were obliterated. The distinctions of race and nationality, of magistrate and father of a family, of patrician and plebeian, of citizen and foreigner, were abolished; all were but men, and in order to recruit members, those religions worked upon man and his character.

In order to gain the masses and the cream of Roman society (as they did for a whole century) the barbarian mysteries had to possess a powerful charm, they had to satisfy the deep wants of the human soul, and their strength had to be superior to that of the ancient Greco-Roman religion. To explain the reasons for their victory we must try to reveal the nature of this superiority—I mean their superiority in the struggle, without assuming innate superiority.

I believe that we can define it by stating that those religions gave greater satisfaction first, to the senses and passions, secondly, to the intelligence, finally, and above all, to the conscience.

\(^7\) Apuleius, *Metam.*, XI, 14 f.

In the first place, they appealed more strongly to the senses. This was their most obvious feature, and it has been pointed out more often than any other. Perhaps there never was a religion so cold and prosaic as the Roman. Being subordinated to politics, it sought, above all, to secure the protection of the gods for the state and to avert the effects of their malevolence by the strict execution of appropriate practices. It entered into a contract with the celestial powers from which mutual obligations arose: sacrifices on one side, favors on the other. The pontiffs, who were also magistrates, regulated the religious practices with the exact precision of jurists; as far as we know the prayers were all couched in formulas as dry and verbose as notarial instruments. The liturgy reminds one of the ancient civil law on account of the minuteness of its prescriptions. This religion looked suspiciously at the abandonment of the soul to the ecstases of devotion. It repressed, by force if necessary, the exuberant manifestations of too ardent faith and everything that was not in keeping with the grave dignity befitting the relations of a civis Romanus with a god. The Jews had the same scrupulous respect as the Romans for a religious code and formulas of the past, “but in spite of their dry and minute practices, the legalism of the Pharisees stirred the heart more strongly than did Roman formalism.”

Lacking the recognized authority of official creeds, the Oriental religions had to appeal to the passions of the individual in order to make proselytes. They attracted men first by the disturbing seductiveness of their mysteries, where terror and hope were evoked in turns, and charmed them by the pomp of their festivities and the magnificence of their processions. Men were fascinated by the languishing songs and intoxicating melodies. Above all these religions taught men how to reach that blissful state in which the soul was freed from the tyranny of the body and of suffering, and lost itself in raptures. They led to ecstasy either by means of nervous tension resulting from continued maceration and fervent contemplation or by more material means like the stimulation of vertiginous dances and dizzy music, or even by the absorption of fermented liquors after a long abstinence, as in the case of the priests of the Great Mother. In mysticism it is easy to slide from the sublime to the vile.

Even the gods, with whom the believers thought they were

9 Cf. Richard Heinze, Archiv für lat. Lexicographie, XV, pp. 90 f
90 Réville, La religion à Rome sous les Sévères, Paris, 1886, p. 144.
uniting themselves in their mystic outbursts, were more human and sometimes more sensual than those of the Occident. The latter had that quietude of soul in which the philosophic morality of the Greeks saw a privilege of the sage; in the serenity of Olympus they enjoyed perpetual youth; they were Immortals. The divinities of the Orient, on the contrary, suffered and died, but only to revive again. Osiris, Attis and Adonis were mourned like mortals by wife or mistress, Isis, Cybele or Astarte. With them the mystics moaned for their deceased god and later, after he had revived, celebrated with exultation his birth to a new life. Or else they joined in the passion of Mithra, condemned to create the world in suffering. This common grief and joy were often expressed with savage violence, by bloody mutilations, long wails of despair, and extravagant acclamations. The manifestations of the extreme fanaticism of those barbarian races that had not been touched by Greek skepticism and the very ardor of their faith enthused the souls of the multitudes attracted by the exotic gods.

The Oriental religions stirred every chord of sensibility and satisfied the thirst for religious emotion that the austere Roman creed had been unable to quench. But at the same time they satisfied the intellect more fully, and this is my second point.

In very early times Greece—later imitated by Rome—became resolutely rationalistic: her greatest originality lies here. Her philosophy was purely laical; thought was unrestrained by any sacred tradition; it even pretended to pass judgment upon these traditions and condemned or approved of them. Being sometimes hostile, sometimes indifferent and sometimes conciliatory, it always remained independent of faith. But while Greece thus freed herself from the fetters of a superannuated mythology, and openly and boldly constructed those systems of metaphysics by means of which she claimed to solve the enigmas of the universe, her religion lost its vitality and dried up because it lacked the strengthening nourishment of reflection. It became a thing devoid of sense, whose raison d'etre was no longer understood, it embodied dead ideas and an obsolete conception of the world. In Greece as well as at Rome it was reduced to a collection of unintelligible rites, scrupulously and mechanically reproduced without addition or omission because they had been practised by the ancestors of long ago, and of formulas hallowed by the mos maiorum, that were no longer understood or sincerely cherished. Never did a people of advanced culture have a more infantile religion.

Firmicus Maternus, *De errore prof. relig.*, c. 8.
The Oriental civilizations on the contrary were sacerdotal in character. As in medieval Europe, the scholars of Asia and Egypt were clergymen. In the temples the nature of the gods and of man were not the only subjects of discussion; mathematics, astronomy, medicine, philology and history were also studied. The successors of Berosus, a priest from Babylonia, and Manetho, a priest from Heliopolis, were considered deeply versed in all intellectual disciplines as late as the time of Strabo.  

This state of affairs proved detrimental to the progress of science. Researches were conducted according to preconceived ideas and were perverted through strange prejudices. Astrology and magic were the monstrous fruit of a hybrid union. But all this certainly gave religion a power it had never possessed either in Greece or Rome.

All results of observation, all conquests of thought were used by an erudite clergy to attain the principle object of their activities, the solution of the problem of the destiny of man and matter, and of the relations of heaven and earth. An ever enlarging conception of the universe kept transforming the modes of belief. Faith presumed to enslave both physics and metaphysics. The credit of every discovery was given to the gods. Tot in Egypt and Bel in Chaldea were the revealers not only of theology and the ritual, but of all human knowledge. The names of the Oriental Hipparchi and Euclids who solved the first problems of astronomy and geometry were unknown; but a confused and grotesque literature made use of the name and authority of Hermes Trismegistus. The doctrines of the planetary spheres and the opposition of the four elements were made to support systems of anthropology and of morality; the theorems of astronomy were used to establish an alleged method of divination; formulas of incantation, supposed to subject divine powers to the magician, were combined with chemical experiments and medical prescriptions.

This intimate union of erudition and faith continued in the Latin world. Theology became more and more a process of deification of the principles or agents discovered by science and a worship of time regarded as the first cause, the stars whose course determined the events of this world, the four elements whose innumerable combinations produced the natural phenomena, and especially the sun which preserved heat, fertility and life. The dogmas of the mysteries of Mithra were, to a certain extent, the religious ex-

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13 Strabo, XVI, 1, § 6; V n. 51; XVII 21, § 46.
14 Deissmann, Licht vom Osten, pp. 91 ff.
pression of Roman physics and astronomy. In all forms of pantheism the knowledge of nature appears to be inseparable from that of God.\textsuperscript{15} Art itself complied more and more with the tendency to express erudite ideas by subtle symbolism, and it represented in allegorical figures the relations of divine powers and cosmic forces, like the sky, the earth, the ocean, the planets, the constellations and the winds. The sculptors engraved on stone everything man thought and taught. In a general way the belief prevailed that redemption and salvation depended on the revelation of certain truths, on a knowledge of the gods, of the world and of our person, and piety became a gnosis.\textsuperscript{16}

But, you will say, since in the classic age philosophy also claimed to lead to morality through instruction and to acquaint man with the supreme good, why did it yield to Oriental religions that were in reality neither original nor innovating? Quite right, and if a powerful rationalist school, possessed of a good critical method, had led the minds, we may believe that it would have checked the invasion of the barbarian mysteries or at least limited their field of action. However, as has frequently been pointed out, even in ancient Greece the philosophic critics had very little hold on popular religion obstinately faithful to its inherited superstitious forms. But how many second century minds shared Lucian's skepticism in regard to the dogmatic systems! The various sects were fighting each other for ever so long without convincing one another of their alleged error. The satirist of Samosata enjoyed opposing their exclusive pretensions while he himself reclined on the "soft pillow of doubt." But only intelligent minds could delight in doubt or surrender to it; the masses wanted certainties. There was nothing to revive confidence in the power of a decrepit and threadbare science. No great discovery transformed the conception of the universe. Nature no longer betrayed her secrets, the earth remained unexplored and the past inscrutable. Every branch of knowledge was forgotten. The world cursed with sterility, could but repeat itself; it had the poignant appreciation of its own decay and impotence. Tired of fruitless researches, the mind surrendered to the necessity of believing. Since the intellect was unable to formulate a consistent rule of life faith alone could supply it, and the multitudes gravitated toward the temples, where the truths taught to man in earlier days by the Oriental gods were revealed. The stanch adherence of past generations to beliefs and rites of unlimited antiquity seemed to guarantee

\textsuperscript{15} Cumont, \textit{Mon. myst. Mithra}, I, p. 312.

\textsuperscript{16} Iamblichus, \textit{De myst.}, II, 11.
their truth and efficacy. This current was so strong that philosophy itself was swept toward mysticism and the neo-Platonist school became a theurgy.

The Oriental mysteries, then, could stir the soul by arousing admiration and terror, pity and enthusiasm in turn. They gave the intellect the illusion of learned depth and absolute certainty and finally—our third point—they satisfied conscience as well as passion and reason. Among the complex causes that guaranteed their domination, this was without doubt the most effective.

In every period of their history the Romans, unlike the Greeks in this respect, judged theories and institutions especially by their practical results. They always had a soldier's and business man's contempt for metaphysicians. It is a matter of frequent observation that the philosophy of the Latin world neglected metaphysical speculations and concentrated its attention on morals, just as later the Roman church left to the subtle Hellenes the interminable controversies over the essence of the divine logos and the double nature of Christ. Questions that could rouse and divide her were those having a direct application to life, like the doctrine of grace.

The old religion of the Romans had to respond to this demand of their genius. Its poverty was honest.17 Its mythology did not possess the poetic charm of that of Greece, nor did its gods have the imperishable beauty of the Olympians, but they were more moral, or at least pretended to be. A large number were simply personified qualities, like chastity and piety. With the aid of the censors they imposed the practice of the national virtues, that is to say of the qualities useful to society, temperance, courage, chastity, obedience to parents and magistrates, reverence for the oath and the law, in fact, the practice of every form of patriotism. During the last century of the republic the pontiff Scaevola, one of the foremost men of his time, rejected as futile the divinities of fable and poetry, as superfluous or obnoxious those of the philosophers and the exegetists, and reserved all his favors for those of the statesmen, as the only ones fit for the people.18 These were the ones protecting the old customs, traditions and frequently even the old privileges. But in the perpetual flux of things conservatism ever carries with it a germ of death. Just as the law failed to maintain the integrity of ancient principles, like the absolute power of the father of the family, principles that were no longer in keeping with the social realities, so religion witnessed the foundering of a system of ethics contrary

to the moral code that had slowly been established. The idea of collective responsibility contained in a number of beliefs is one instance. If a vestal violated her vow of chastity the divinity sent a pest that ceased only on the day the culprit was punished. Sometimes the angry heavens granted victory to the army only on condition that a general or a soldier dedicate himself to the infernal gods as an expiatory victim. However, through the influence of the philosophers and the jurists the conviction slowly gained ground that each one was responsible for his own misdeeds and that it was not equitable to make a whole city suffer for the crime of an individual. People ceased to admit that the gods crushed the good as well as the wicked in one punishment. Often, also, the divine anger was thought to be as ridiculous in its manifestations as in its cause. The rural superstitions of the country districts of Latium continued to live in the pontifical code of the Roman people. If a lamb with two heads or a colt with five legs was born, solemn supplications were prescribed to avert the misfortunes foreboded by those terrifying prodigies.19

All these puerile and monstrous beliefs that burdened the religion of the Latins had thrown it into disrepute. Its morality no longer responded to the new conception of justice beginning to prevail. As a rule Rome remedied the poverty of her theology and ritual by taking what she needed from the Greeks. But here this resource failed her because the poetic, artistic and even intellectual religion of the Greeks was hardly moral. And the fables of a mythology jeered at by the philosophers, parodied on the stage and put to verse by libertine poets were anything but edifying.

Moreover—this was its second weakness—whatever morality it demanded of a pious man went unrewarded. People no longer believed that the gods continually intervened in the affairs of men to reveal hidden crimes and to punish triumphant vice, or that Jupiter would hurl his thunderbolt to crush the perjurer. At the time of the proscriptions and the civil wars under Nero or Commodus it was more than plain that power and possessions were for the strongest, the ablest or even the luckiest, and not for the wisest or the most pious. The idea of reward or punishment beyond the grave found little credit. The notions of future life were hazy, uncertain, doubtful and contradictory. Everybody knows Juvenal's famous lines: "That there are manes, a subterranean kingdom, a ferryman with a long pole, and black frogs in the whirlpools of the Styx; that so

19 Lutherbacher, *Der Prodigenglaube der Römer*, Burgdorf, 1904.
many thousand men could cross the waves in a single boat, to-day even children refuse to believe." 20

After the fall of the republic indifference spread, the temples were abandoned and threatened to tumble into ruins, the clergy found it difficult to recruit members, the festivities, once so popular, fell into desuetude, and Varro, at the beginning of his Antiquities, expressed his fear lest "the gods might perish, not from the blows of foreign enemies, but from very neglect on the part of the citizens." 21 It is well known that Augustus, prompted by political rather than by religious reasons, attempted to revive the dying religion. His religious reforms stood in close relation to his moral legislation and the establishment of the imperial dignity. Their tendency was to bring the people back to the pious practice of ancient virtues but also to chain them to the new political order. The alliance of throne and altar in Europe dates from that time.

This attempted reform failed entirely. Making religion an auxiliary to moral policing is not a means of establishing its empire over souls. Formal reverence for the official gods is not incompatible with absolute and practical skepticism. The restoration attempted by Augustus is nevertheless very characteristic because it is so consistent with the Roman spirit which by temperament and tradition demanded that religion should support morality and the state.

The Asiatic religions fulfilled the requirements. The change of regime, although unwelcome, brought about a change of religion. The increasing tendency of Cæsarism toward absolute monarchy made it lean more and more upon the Oriental clergy. True to the traditions of the Achemenides and the Pharaohs, those priests preached doctrines tending to elevate the sovereign above humanity, and they supplied the emperors with dogmatic justification for their despotism. 22

It is a noteworthy fact that the rulers who most loudly proclaimed their autocratic pretensions, like Domitian and Commodus, were also those that favored the foreign creeds most openly.

But this selfish support merely sanctioned a power already established. The propaganda of the Oriental religions was originally democratic and sometimes even revolutionary like the Isis worship. Step by step they advanced, always reaching higher social

20 Juvenal, II, 149.
21 Augustine, Civit. dei, VI, 2; Varro, Antiq., Aghad ed., 141.
classes and appealing to popular conscience rather than to the zeal of functionaries.

As a matter of fact all these religions, except that of Mithra, seem at first sight to be far less austere than the Roman creed. We shall have occasion to note that they contained coarse and immodest fables and atrocious or vile rites. The Egyptian gods were expelled from Rome by Augustus and Tiberius on the charge of being immoral, but they were called immoral principally because they opposed a certain conception of the social order. They gave little attention to the public interest but attached considerable importance to the inner life and consequently to the value of the individual. Two new things, in particular, were brought to Italy by the Oriental priests: mysterious methods of purification, by which they claimed to wash away the impurities of the soul, and the assurance that a blessed immortality would be the reward of piety.  

These religions pretended to restore lost purity to the soul either through the performance of ritual ceremonies or through mortification and penance. They had a series of ablutions and instructions supposed to restore original innocence to the mystic. He had to wash himself in the sacred water according to certain prescribed forms. This was really a magic rite, because bodily purity acted sympathetically upon the soul, or else it was a real spiritual disinfection with the water driving out the evil spirits that had caused pollution. The votary, again, might drink or besprinkle himself with the blood of a slaughtered victim or of the priests themselves, in which case the prevailing idea was that the liquid circulating in the veins was a vivifying principle capable of imparting a new existence. These and similar rites used in the mysteries were supposed to regenerate the initiated person and to restore him to an immaculate and incorruptible life.

Purgation of the soul was not effected solely by liturgic acts but also by self-denial and suffering. The meaning of the term expiatio changed. Expiation, or atonement, was no longer accomplished by the exact performance of certain ceremonies pleasing to the gods and required by a sacred code like a penalty for damages, but by privation and personal suffering. Abstinence, which pre-

23 The Greeks were familiar with mysteries.
25 This will be treated at greater length in another article (Asia Minor).
26 Frazer, Golden Bough, 1, p. 60.
27 Frazer, Golden Bough, 111, pp. 424 ff.
28 Augustine, Civit. dei, X, 28.
vented the introduction of deadly elements into the system, and chastity, which preserved man from pollution and debility, became means of getting rid of the domination of the evil powers and of regaining heavenly favor.29 Macerations, laborious pilgrimages, public confessions, sometimes flagellations and mutilations, in fact all forms of penance and mortification uplifted the fallen man and brought him nearer to the gods. In Phrygia a sinner would write his sin and the punishment he suffered upon a stela for every one to see and would return thanks to heaven that his prayer of repentance had been heard.30 The Syrian, who had offended his goddess by eating her sacred fish, dressed in sordid rags, covered himself with a sack and sat in the public highway humbly to proclaim his misdeed in order to obtain forgiveness.31 “Three times, in the depths of winter,” says Juvenal, “the devotee of Isis will dive into the chilly waters of the Tiber, and shivering with cold, will drag herself around the temple upon her bleeding knees; if the goddess commands, she will go to the outskirts of Egypt to take water from the Nile and empty it within the sanctuary.”32 This shows the introduction into Europe of Oriental asceticism.

But there were impious acts and impure passions that contaminated and defiled the soul. Since this infection could be destroyed only by expiations prescribed by the gods, the extent of the sin and the character of the necessary penance had to be estimated. It was the priest’s prerogative to judge the misdeeds and to impose the penalties. This circumstance gave the clergy a very different character from the one it had at Rome. The priest was no longer simply the guardian of sacred traditions, the intermediary between man or the state and the gods, but also a spiritual guide. He taught his flock the long series of obligations and restrictions for shielding their weakness from the attacks of evil spirits. He knew how to quiet remorse and scruples, and to restore the sinner to spiritual calm. Being well versed in sacred knowledge, he had the power of reconciling the gods. Frequent sacred repasts maintained a spirit of fellowship among the mystics of Cybele, Mithra or the Baals,33 and a daily service unceasingly revived the faith of the Isis worshippers. In consequence, the clergy were entirely absorbed in their holy office and lived only for and by their temples. Unlike the

30 Ramsay, *Cities*, I, pp. 134, 152
31 Tertullian, *De Paenit.*, c. 9.
32 Juvenal, VI, 523 ff.; 537 ff.
sacerdotal colleges of Rome in which the secular and religious functions were not yet clearly differentiated, they were not an administrative commission ruling the sacred affairs of the state under the supervision of the senate; they formed what might almost be called a caste of recluses distinguished from ordinary men by their insignia, garb, habits and food, and constituting an independent body with a hierarchy, formulary and even councils of their own. They did not return to every-day duties as private citizens or to the direction of public affairs as magistrates as the ancient pontiffs had done after the solemn festival service.

We can readily understand that these beliefs and institutions were bound to establish the Oriental religions and their priests on a strong basis. Their influence must have been especially powerful at the time of the Caesars. The laxity of morals at the beginning of our era has been exaggerated but it was real. Many unhealthy symptoms told of a profound moral anarchy weighing on a weakened and irresolute society. The farther we go toward the end of the empire, the more its energy seems to fail and the character of men to weaken. The number of strong healthy minds incapable of a lasting aberration and without need of guidance or comfort was growing ever smaller. We note the spread of that feeling of exhaustion and debility which follows the aberrations of passion, and the same weakness that led to crime impelled men to seek absolution in the formal practices of asceticism. They applied to the Oriental priests for spiritual remedies.

People flattered themselves that by performing the rites they would attain a condition of felicity after death. All barbarian mysteries pretended to reveal to their adherents the secret of blessed immortality. Participation in the occult ceremonies of the sect was a chief means of salvation. The vague and disheartening beliefs of ancient paganism in regard to life after death were transformed into the firm hope of a well-defined form of happiness.

This faith in a personal survival of the soul and even of the body was based upon a strong instinct of human nature, the instinct of self-preservation. Social and moral conditions in the empire during its decline gave it greater strength than it had ever

34 This process, according to Spencer, is a characteristic of religious evolution.
37 These doctrines will be explained in other articles (Egypt and Persia).
possessed before. The third century saw so much suffering, anguish and violence, so much unnecessary ruin and so many unpunished crimes, that the Roman world took refuge in the expectation of a better existence in which all the iniquity of this world would be retrieved. No earthly hope brightened life. The tyranny of a corrupt bureaucracy choked all disposition for political progress. Science stagnated and revealed no more unknown truths. Growing poverty discouraged the spirit of enterprise. The idea gained ground that humanity was afflicted with incurable decay, that nature was approaching her doom and that the end of the world was near. We must remember all these causes of discouragement and despondency to understand the power of the idea, expressed so frequently, that the spirit animating man was forced by bitter necessity to imprison itself in matter and that it was delivered from its carnal captivity by death. In the heavy atmosphere of a period of oppression and impotence the dejected soul longed with incredible ardor to fly to the radiant abode of heaven.

To recapitulate, the Oriental religions acted upon the senses, the intellect and the conscience at the same time, and therefore gained a hold on the entire man. Compared with the ancient creeds, they appear to have offered greater beauty of ritual, greater truth of doctrine and a far superior morality. The imposing ceremonial of their festivity and the alternating pomp and sensuality, gloom and exaltation of their services appealed especially to the simple and the humble, while the progressive revelation of ancient wisdom, inherited from the old and distant Orient, captivated the cultured mind. The emotions excited by these religions and the consolations offered strongly attracted the women, who were the most fervent and generous followers and most passionate propagandists of the religions of Isis and Cybele. Mithra was worshiped almost exclusively by men, whom he subjected to a rigid moral discipline. Thus souls were gained by the promise of spiritual purification and the prospect of eternal happiness.

The worship of the Roman gods was a civic duty, the worship of the foreign gods the expression of a personal belief. The latter were the objects of the thoughts, feelings and intimate aspirations of the individual, not merely of the traditional and, one might say, functional adoration of the citizen. The ancient municipal devotions were connected with a number of earthly interests that helped

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38 Bardenhewer, Gesch. der altkirchlichen Literatur, 1903. p. 470.
39 Lucretius, II, 1170 ff.
40 Boissier, Rel. rom., I, p. 359.
to support each other. They were one of various forms of family spirit and patriotism and guaranteed the prosperity of the community. The Oriental mysteries, directing the will toward an ideal goal and exalting the inner spirit, were less mindful of economic utility, but they could produce that vibration of the moral being that caused emotions, stronger than any rational faculty, to gush forth from the depths of the soul. Through a sudden illumination they furnished the intuition of a spiritual life whose intensity made all material happiness appear insipid and contemptible. This stirring appeal of supernatural life made the propaganda irresistible. The same ardent enthusiasm guaranteed at the same time the uncontested domination of neo-Platonism among the philosophers. Antiquity expired and a new era was born.