

History of Christianity

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The Bourgeois revolution and the secularization that followed didn't abolish religion completely, nor left in the past. To this day religion as a social institution does not only still holds its power, but also has a significant impact on consciousness of modern people. It means that religion is used as propaganda of non-resistance and resignation with reality of the exploitative system of the ruling class.

The issue with religion is of particular importance here in Russia, where the ongoing process of clericalization of all spheres of life has been continuing for decades. In order for the working class to successfully resist the toxic, mythical, and idealistic religious worldview, which distracts them from the real knowledge of the material world, it is necessary to know at least the basics of the history of religions. That is why the first article of "atheistic elimination of illiteracy" series is dedicated to the topic of Christianity. The purpose of the article is to educate people on the topic of religion.

The Roman Empire in I century

It is known that Christianity originated in the Roman Empire at the beginning of the first Millennium AD. At the time The Empire was a large state, where one half of the population was slaves and the other half was citizens and non-citizens (nationals), i.e. free inhabitants of the controlled provinces. According to the 14 AD census, there were 5 million citizens and 55 million provincial nationals, while more than 60 million people were slaves.

Roman authorities had complete domination over the provinces, literally depleting their resources with the help of its officials that were appointed by the Roman nobility. The officials obtained a huge number of rights to rule over the territories.

In addition to being oppressed by the central authorities, provincials and citizens were oppressed by rich slave owners: cheap slave labor resulted in cheap products, which made less profitable owners, peasants and urban artisans broke. They were forced either to join groups of urban lumpenproletariat, or to remain in the same position and be dependent on large landowners as tenant-coloni.

Meanwhile, slave labor became more and more inefficient and unproductive, as slaves were not interested in the final product of their labor. To make slave labor more effective using new equipment was also not possible - slaves would break the tools, or otherwise deliberately intended to break them down. Under these conditions the owners of latifundia were forced to increase the number of slaves and exploit them greatly in order to maintain the profitability of their farms. This, on the one hand, led to empowering of the plundering policy of the Roman government, which roused wars for the sake of enslavement, and on the other hand caused collapse of the slavery-based economy which resulted in a wide revolutionary sentiment of oppressed masses.

From the middle of the II century BC, Italy and its provinces were almost continuously racked by civil wars against the entire system of socioeconomic relations of the slavery-based state. During this period, we can see numerous revolts of slaves (two revolts in Sicily, Eumenes' revolt in Asia Minor, the large-scale Spartacus revolt), and the movement of small peasants for land ownership (the

so-called "Gracchi reform " and other movements against big latifundia owners), and the revolt of the provincials for obtaining civil rights (the revolt of the Italic people, Rome war against Mithridates). In short, the Roman Republic was involved in a severe revolutionary crisis.

However, all these spontaneous revolutionary movements could not turn into a proper revolution. Partly because of powerful slavery-based Rome, partly because of lack of coordination of actions and cultural antagonism among slaves and free peasants, and partly because of low level of class consciousness and the lack of a coherent plan in the revolutionary movement itself.

The immediate result of that severe crisis was the transition of the Republican state of Rome to a new political system - the Empire, i.e. the reactionary military dictatorship by big slave owners and latifundia owners. Terrorist regime of the Empire plainly suppressed not only new revolutionary rebellions but also remaining opposition, including the opposed groups among slave owners themselves, who were dissatisfied with the termination of the Republican system.

All that led to deep despair and apathy in the lowest, most exploited strata of Roman society. Hopes for future liberation collapsed.

That social depression, which spread all over the Empire in the I century BC was very favorable to the development of all sorts of mystical beliefs. Desperate slaves, broke peasants and lumpen-proletarians who had suffered a complete defeat in the real world looked up to the sky, to the fantastic world of magical heroes, that would bring freedom from all troubles.

End of folk religions

Having abolished the socioeconomic way of life of individual peoples, the Roman Empire abolished folk religions, which were based on the social system that had gone into oblivion under the pressure from the legionaries. The Roman conquest, which put an end to independence of numerous peoples and countries, dealt a mortal blow to folk religions. Folks' deities unable to protect independence of the nationals, lost the admirers and gradually disappeared from the historical stage.

But implanted by invaders, the Roman religion could not satisfy the people left without spiritual support, because essentially it was a religion of the oppressors, the extremely narrow national religion of the Roman slave-owning elite, moreover it was in crisis too.

The attempts of Augustus to introduce the cult of the emperors as a new world religion for all peoples were not crowned with huge success, although the attempts created the base for the future Christian ideas of the "God-man".

In such a difficult moment variations of Eastern beliefs start spreading among the numerous multinational mass of inhabitants of the Empire: the cult of Osiris and Isis (Egypt), Attis and Cybele (Asia Minor and Central Asia), Tammuz and Ishtar (Babylonia), Dionysus (Greece), Mithras (Persia). Typical that all those cults were originally peasant, agricultural in nature and were associated with a belief in a deity who dies and then resurrects.

Over time, the gods of agricultural cults acquire the features of deliverance gods, who, through their death, redeemed the sins of people, and by resurrection gave them hope for immortality.

In contrast to the dull and prosaic Roman religion, the colorful ritualism of those cults was mystical and attractive to the masses. All cults were considered as some sort of a secret and were only for the "initiates." The services were theatrical, accompanied by mysterious music, an alternation of lighting and darkness, dizzying dances and frantic prayers.

Another important factor of popularity of Eastern cults was messianism, which, in turn, served as an expression of despair of wide sections of the population in the times of deepening crisis of the slavery-based system. At the end of the I century BC messianic sentiments already began to spread throughout the Empire, which resonated with disappointed and frustrated lower classes. For example, the Roman army suppression of the revolutionary movement in alliance with the Jewish elite in Judea brought to life a large-scale messianic and eschatological movement, the most striking examples of which could be called the Theudas' "prophets" and the "Egyptians" mentioned by Josephus. There were hundreds if not thousands poor Jews that rushed into the desert to meet with the "messiah".

Similar ideas, that reflected deep economic and ideological crisis of the Roman slavery-based state, were especially seen in the Iranian cult of the Divinity of Light Mithra. The worshipers of Mithra - and that's where they had similarities with the Jews - were waiting for the imminent arrival of the Messiah, the Savior, who would raise the people from the dead, and then, after the judgment, cleanse the earth with righteous fire, destroying the sinners and the god Ahriman, the culprit of evil on earth. After this, together with the righteous, Mithra will settle an eternal kingdom of bliss and justice.

It should be noted that Mithraism in the I century BC. was popular among the Roman army - they were on Persian's territories, and soon spread throughout the Empire, and due to its relative democratism and magnificent mysteries became the main competitor of developing Christianity. Having spread in the borderline provinces, Mithraism was spreading even among the higher ranks of the imperial nobility from time to time. The emperors Commodus (end of the II century AD) and Aurelian (III century) themselves were followers of Mithraism, and were contributing to its spreading in Roman society.

The evidence of extremely powerful influence of the Mithraic cult of the Unconquered Sun (Sol Invictus) in the Roman Empire - which was in decline, can be the Christians borrowing many rites, symbols and dogmas from the successful competitor that have already rooted deeply in society.

So, even the main symbol of Christianity, the cross, was clearly borrowed from the Mithraists, where inscribed in a circle, it denoted the Sun. The ministers of the Mysteries of Mithras put a similar symbol on the forehead of the neophytes at "initiation". Another equally obvious borrowing is the Nativity of Christ, established by the Church only in the year 354. By that time, the Mithraic festival of the "birth of the Unconquered Sun" was already widespread in the Empire. The festival occurred on December 25, on the day of the winter solstice according to the Julian calendar. Unable to overcome survival of paganism in the flock, the clergy just "legitimized" this heterodox feast, connecting it to the Gospel.

However, at the same time, many other elements of Mithraism appeared in the Christian rituals and Christian mythology: the doctrine of the immaculate conception of the Christian "Savior", belief in ascension of the "Savior" to heaven, the communion, the use of "holy" water, observance Sunday day etc. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it was that precise tactics helped Christianity win over such powerful rivals as Mithraism and the cult of the Unconquered Sun.

Formation of Christianity

The birthplace of Christianity is by no means Palestine, but Asia Minor. This is evidenced by the fact that the oldest work of Christian literature, "The Revelation of John," mentions only Asian communities, but does not mention Palestinian ones. Numerous Jewish settlers had long lived there in Asia Minor, and were a part of the so-called "exile."

Under conditions of living in a foreign land, among "pagans", the Jews of the Diaspora could not fulfill the countless prescriptions of orthodox Judaism with precision. Gradually abandoning the prohibitions and rituals regarding clothing, food and communication with the "pagans", the Jews ceased to perceive Yahweh as the God of the Jewish people only (i.e. henotheism). Yahweh was the most powerful of all other ethnic gods, and was turned into the "one true god" of all mankind. These beliefs of Jewish settlers in particular created the basis of Christian monotheism.

The Christian worldview was also influenced by the teachings of Philo of Alexandria who was a prominent representative of the Jewish exile. In 1 century BC he turned the idea of a one God into a philosophical notion. It was him who introduced the notion of Logos (derived from Greek "word", "opinion") as a perfect manifestation of an absolute deity, a mediator between God and the World. In Christianity, Logos was embodied in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was between heaven and earth, and the second hypostasis of the Trinity God, between God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Undoubtedly, another philosophical school that influenced the formation of not only Christianity, but also numerous Gnostic sects of the same period (such as the famous Essenes or Therapeutae), was stoicism, teaching on the mortality of life, mortification of the flesh, the equality of all people and the divine mind governing the world.

The messianic idea in Christianity also underwent through some transformations: while the Jews of Palestine, driven by patriotism, were waiting for a king from the kin of David who would free the Jews from the Roman oppressors with the help of arms the Jewish diaspora, despaired in the success of the class struggle against oppression, only hoped for heavenly help. They thought the messiah turned from the liberator of the Jewish people into a saviour of humanity.

The image of the savior himself did not immediately emerge. It went through many transformations under influence of various factors. In the "Book of Revelation" the image of Christ is still very far from that magical person that we now know. Here, Jesus Christ is not even a man, but a kind of anthropomorphic terrifying creature descending from heaven only in order to bring death to the "great harlot"- the Roman Empire. He also has other characteristics: he leads the heavenly army, sometimes he acts as a judge, or even dissects on a white horse surrounded by outlandish creatures. We see that in this early artifact of Christianity, Jesus is depicted as a vividly unearthly being, having little in common with the late image of the magical carpenter.

In the form of a man-god who descended from Heaven and suffered for people's sins, Jesus appears in The "Pauline epistles", the second, later work of Christian literature. But even in this book nothing is specific: the personality of an abstract savior-messiah corresponds perfectly with the canon of the Eastern agricultural cults with their dying and reborn gods, like Attis or Osiris.

And only in the Gospels, the most recent works of Christian literature (mid-II century AD), appears a detailed familiar to us "biography" of Jesus. Jesus takes on the traits of a "historical" person who embodied the most common ideas in society about a God-man, such as turning water into wine or flying through Heaven.

As for miracles performed by Jesus, even they do not surpass the ideas of the era, which are formed, first of all, under the influence of the cult of deified Roman emperors, who could well compete with the Christian savior in the art of magic. For example, according to ancient authors, the emperor Vespasian just by touching heals a cripple and returns the sight to a blind man by spitting in his face, and the emperor Augustus, in addition to many miraculous healings and even the resurrection of the dead, managed to be born in the immaculate conception from the god Apollo himself. By the way, after his own death, Octavian Augustus was seen ascending to heaven like an eagle. It could be said that the Christians – just as in the case with Mithraism or the cult of Isis (from which the image of the Mother of God was almost literally borrowed) – simply brought already existing and very popular ideas about the man-god in their mythology. Ideas about God’s son, who undoubtedly must have some special skills that distinguished him from ordinary people.

Thus, the image of Jesus Christ is purely mythological and through the course of time the believers didn’t deified Jesus – as it happened with Muhammad – but on the contrary they made his abstract deity to be humanlike in order to make its image understandable to the poor and uneducated masses.

This, also, is confirmed by the fact that the early Christians depicted Jesus exclusively using a symbol of a fish or a lamb. And only from the end of the II century they began to depict Jesus as a human, and even then – it was not the same image that we see in churches. The early Jesus is a young, 30-year-old beardless robust and joyful man. It was only at the end of the VII century that the icon painting of the Savior was finally approved at the Quinisext Council where the image of the Saviour showed a feeble, bearded European-looking man with blissfully suffering eyes.

Reasons for success of Christianity

Originally a small sect within the Jewish diaspora, Christianity gained popularity relatively quickly throughout the Roman Empire, not only having left competing cults behind, but also having turned into the official religion of Rome.

The reasons for such great success are not only because Christianity managed to accumulate the most advanced and popular religious ideas of that time, but also because how they organized their work.

Unlike their “spiritual competitors,” Christians tried to convert many people into their beliefs: in each city they propagate their beliefs, addressing primarily to the poor. While Mithraists or Isis’ followers imposed many obstacles to the neophytes on their way to know the secrets of the cult and join it, the Christians denied the “elitism” of their religion, welcoming in their society anyone who shared their worldview.

A huge contribution to its success was inclusive attitudes towards women. While members of other Eastern cults continued to adhere to the ancient tradition of contempt for women (Mithraists, for example, completely rejected the possibility of women joining the cult of the “Unconquered sun”), the first believers Christians were open even to the most despised women – the so-called “harlots.” That’s why the image of the repenting prostitute Mary Magdalene was introduced into Christian mythology.

The Christian communities in itself served then not only as a consolation for those who mourn and were in despair, but also they were a kind of union of mutual assistance and charity, financially supporting the most disadvantaged. The decisive role was also played by the “flexibility” of the hierarchy of the early Christian communities, which was built almost entirely on election, capable of easily adapting to a changing situation.

The ideology of the early Christianity also contributed to upcoming of people from lower classes: egalitarianism, dogmatic attacks on the rich, praise of poverty, hatred for Rome, and the expectation of a forthcoming deliverance. That all found a lively response from the main contingent of the Christian communities of the I-II centuries. AD which were slaves, freedmen, broke peasants and the urban lumpenproletariat.

Finally, the most important reason for the rise of Christianity is that it was the ideology of a new socioeconomic formation, which was emerging to replace the dying and decaying slave-ownership system, which was feudalism.

In contrast to the slavery-based ideology, where it is though that slavery is of the divine character, the Christians proclaimed the equality of people before God. In contrast to the slaveowners who divided society into “lower” and “higher” class, into “citizens” and “provincials”, into “barbarians” and “quirites”, the Christians did not accept any social, religious or ethnic differences between people. In contrast to slaveowners who praised idleness and contempt for physical labor, the Christians respected workers and generally condemned the social parasitism of the wealthy elite of the Roman Empire. That is, Christianity objectively contributed to the destruction of obsolete relations of production through destruction of the ideology that these relations sacred, which dragged further economic and social development of society.

Considering this reason, we can say that at a certain stage, Christianity, with its democratic demands, played a limited revolutionary role in undermining the religious domination of the slavery-based state.

Christianity grows stronger

Awaiting for an imminent doomsday, which went together with falling and punishment of the “great harlot the Roman Empire” that was vividly stated in the “The Book of Revelation,” did not last long. Stabilization and strengthening of the central authority, growth of oppression and the further devastation of the population, have undermined all hopes of the believers for speedy falling of the world slave-ownership Empire. The end of the world had to happen later.

At the same time, the very nature of Christianity began to change.

From the second half of the II century A.D. the middle urban strata already prevail in the Christian communities. They were merchants, artisans, small landowners. This can be explained by the fact that the deep crisis of the economic basis (slave-based system) was reflected in the general ideological crisis: skepticism and despair swept over wider strata whose members were seeking spiritual support in the new religion. On the other hand, it becomes economically profitable for merchants and artisans to be Christians, for in each city of the Empire there were Christian communities ready to render any feasible help to fellow believers in organizing trade or setting manufactures.

A change in the communities led to change in the Christian ideology.

First of all, "anti-property" ideas of the first Christians were obstructed and attacked. Second of all, early anti-state sentiments were nullified. As a result, "moderate", "adaptive" movement of the wealthy strata wins within Christian circle, that calls for putting up with reality, whatever it may be. But this victory was not complete and unquestioning. If in the central part of the Empire the "poor-class sentiments" were more or less quickly put to an end, then on the outskirts, where the main members of the Christian communities were still poor, fight between the "moderate" and "radical" movements continued over the next three centuries. The proof is the huge work of one of the first sects condemned by the official church - the Agonistici or Circumcellions.

The Agonistici movement, reflecting radical demands by the poor and spreading in North African Roman provinces in IV-V AD was doing rather huge damage not only to slave owners in power, but to the official church under their control. As the Agonistici, believed in the ideas of "christianity of communist character" they didn't not only free slaves, killed landowners, money-lenders, the rich and high-ranking officials but also organized and lead revolts by the rural poor and slaves against central government. They also attacked members of the orthodox church, ruined churches, propagated ideas against conciliatory ideas of acolytes.

It is typical that The Agonistici had huge support from another "popular" radical sect - the sect of the Donatists, which consisted of fanatics who were outraged by the cooperation of the clergy of the Carthaginian church with the imperial authority in the times of the so-called "Persecution." That is, back in the IV-V centuries confrontation of the "official" church with the rest of the former revolutionary democratic sentiments was by no means completed.

At the same time as ideology was changing, the Christian communities were also changing. If in the I-II centuries the dominant positions in the Christian communities was held by exalted preachers who were ready to die in the name of their ideals, then with the empowering of prosperous strata in the communities, power was passed to officials elected from among the richest members - presbyters (elders), deacons (heads of the economic unit), bishops (leaders). These respectable men, having taken over all the affairs of the community, began to implant new rules in favor of the propertied strata.

The egalitarianism of the early Christians, such as sharing property among all members or sharing food, were replaced by easy and fairly limited charity. Issues with economic management, issues with increasing property and wealth of communities came first. That's why, all Christian literature that has been here to this day is subjected to severe editing, where numerous, apparently, seditious (i.e., threatening authorities of wealthy members) ideas of the early Christians are carefully eliminated.

In the III century, the growth and spread of Christianity only intensified. Now even large proprietors and bigwigs are joining the new religion, for by that time Christianity was no longer the religion of the opposed to the authorities rampant gangs, but was a solid and peaceful doctrine of saving souls.

At the same time, the church hierarchy, built on the monarchical principle, finally takes shape, with rich landowners, merchants and moneylenders suddenly appearing at the highest posts.

In the III-IV centuries the growth of influence and wealth of the Church gave an excuse to Roman authorities initiate persecution of a surprisingly large religious sect, to which even representatives of the imperial bureaucracy and members of ruling families belonged at that time. It must be emphasized that it was the expropriation of acquired wealth, and not the struggle with the Christian religion as such, that was the real reason for the so-called "Persecution" directed almost

exclusively against the higher clergy. Part of which, as can be seen in the example of the Archdiocese of Carthage alone that managed to collaborate with the imperial authorities in a business-like manner, waging a consistent struggle against the “anti-state” sentiments of ordinary Christians.

However, Rome could no longer break down the huge and rich “state in the state” by any administrative methods, which encompassed the entire empire and included a large number of senior officials, wealthy landowners and the vast majority of the commercial and industrial urban strata.

In this regard, in 311, Emperor Galerius of the Nicomedia legitimated Christianity with edict, and 2 years later Emperor Constantine with the Edict of Milan not only returned property to the Church that was expropriated in the time of persecution, but also paid substantial compensation for destroyed movable and immovable property, monuments, places of worship, etc. Thus, Constantine gained the most powerful social and ideological support from the Christian Church that took the place of hopelessly outdated, no longer meeting the requirements of that time and in a permanent crisis of the old religion of the ancient gods. Christianity was turning into a world religion.

Conclusion

So, in general, we got acquainted with the history of origin and formation of Christianity. We saw that appearance of this originally small-town Asia Minor syncretic cult and its rising to the level of the state religion of the Roman Empire was not the result of “God’s providence”, but had completely material socio-economic reasons.

Being initially the ideology of the defeated, broke poor and slaves, the outcome of powerless malice of millions of oppressed by the existing system, Christianity at some point played a progressive role in the destruction of the slave-ownership ideology, which objectively deteriorated the development of society.

However, a real revolution could not go in either religious nor ideological form, but only active political one; and on this side, Christianity at its earliest stages showed its reactionary self, preaching a passive expectation of death of the hated slavery-based empire. A very active participation of Christians in provincial riots, in the uprisings of slaves and columns of the III-IV centuries. in Gaul (Bagaudae rebellion) or North Africa (The Agonistici rebellion) are more likely a conformance exception, the “concession” of Christianity to local radical poor moods.

In general, even at the times of highest exaltation, Christian preachers, constantly cursing what is behind the “great harlot” and universally prevailing rules, did not seek to destroy the unjust system at all. Calling on the masses to fully rely on the help of the divine savior who, by his forthcoming arrival, will solve all problems, Christianity objectively played into the hands of the slave-owning elite, stopping the revolutionary movement of the exploited and oppressed.

With the strengthening of Christianity, these reactionary features became more apparent, eventually taking the form of the postulates of “humility and meekness” and “the divine nature of all authority.” This is understandable: even the occasional rebellious speeches of Christ’s admirers can seriously undermine the economic activities of the Church, which by the end of the II century already represented a powerful and rich public institution, actively fighting for political power.

On the other hand, the ruling elite of the slave-owning states, having lost their ideological footing, in the face of imminent collapse saw a saving straw in rising Christianity. Thus, in the III century, at first Christianity became the state religion of the kingdom of Edessa, then gained influence in the Palmyra state, and at the beginning of the IV century it became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

Adoption of Christianity was happening at the same time with slavery-based Empire changing into feudal Empire. Those changes started happening with Diocletian's reforms (284-305) though after adopted Christianity the Roman Empire was still slavery-based state. But members of the Church having gained acceptance didn't care about the Empire being a slave-ownership state.

Having got enormous economic opportunities and privileges from the exploiters, the Church fully paid for that act of kindness with the ideological support of the ruling class. The final transition to feudalism did not change the situation - the Christian church, which became the largest landowner of that time, put all spiritual and physical efforts to strengthen this new mode of exploitation, as well as to curb it - as in the first years of its formation - the revolutionary energy of the oppressed masses.

The collapse of feudalism under the movement of the emerging Bourgeois class caused some confusion, since the capitalists, who were vitally interested in the development of science in the name of the development of production, initially started an active fight against the Christian church, which stubbornly held on to the most reactionary views that impeded the development of all scientific thought. However, with the appearance on the historical arena of a new revolutionary class, the proletariat, threatening to completely end all regimes of exploitation and oppression, all social parasitism, all kinds of superstition and delusion, the situation "cleared up". The bourgeoisie quickly found a common language with the Christian church.

All grudges of the past were forgotten in the name of a common cause - to prevent the social revolution of the working class, which threatens, on the one hand, to deprive the capitalists of their political and economic domination, and on the other hand, to destroy the environment that is "nutritious" for the development of religion in the form of ignorance, fear, social depression, alienation. That is, to eliminate the source of religion, and therefore all religious institutions with all their privileges, wealth and power over the minds of people.

Therefore, one should not be surprised that today, despite the difficult obstacles made by science on religion, the Christian church, although pretty battered, very rudely, with the full support of the ruling class, is again trying to impose its "pastoral" services on society in order to extend capitalist existence; the system of economic relations, which is the source of all modern social decompositions and vices - alcoholism, drug addiction, immorality, selfishness, violence, etc. - with which the Christian church allegedly leads its hypocritical "struggle".