

## Christianity: A New State Religion

Religion in the Italian Peninsula had a long history. The early Romans had worshipped the spirit gods of the Etruscans, their neighbors to the north.

Later Romans adopted the gods of the Greeks as their deities. However, Roman tradition allowed people to worship according to the dictates of their own hearts. As a result of this religious freedom, many different religions and sects flourished in the Roman Empire.

Around 30 A.D., a new religious movement began among the Jews in the distant borders of the Roman Empire. A group of Jews began following the teachings of a new leader by the name of Jesus Christ. Slowly this movement expanded beyond the Jews to many other peoples in the surrounding areas, and a new religion was born. This new religion would be known as Christianity.

After the death of Jesus, his followers continued to teach those things that he had taught them. They taught that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for.

Many people throughout the Mediterranean accepted these teachings, and became known as Christians. For the next 300 years, Christianity was practiced by many city dwellers in private. Roman officials viewed Christians as a threat and often had them killed. Christians continued to establish churches and to spread their religion, but they did so discreetly.

In 312 A.D., an important Roman general by the name of Constantine was converted to Christianity through a spiritual experience he had on the battlefield. That same year, Constantine was made emperor of Rome.

Under his leadership, Constantine offered protection to Christians, allowing Christian churches to be built throughout the empire, and allowing Christianity to spread more quickly.



By 392 A.D., Christianity had become a powerful force in Rome. It was practiced from border to border. In this same year, the emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the state religion and outlawed all other religious practices.

Christians began to organize their church into parishes, which were overseen by priests. Several parishes formed what was called a diocese. Each diocese was led by a bishop.

Eventually the bishop in Rome began to claim authority over all other bishops, and gave himself the title of 'papa', or Pope. The Western parishes readily accepted the authority of the Pope, however, the Eastern churches did not. The churches in the West eventually became known as the Roman Catholic Church, while the churches in the East joined together to form the Eastern Orthodox Church.

## The End of the Roman Empire



After a brief period of peace known as the Pax Romana, which lasted about 200 years, Rome fell into a long slow period of decline. Instead of focusing on protecting their borders, Roman armies began fighting against one another. As a result, many outside invaders were able to enter Rome and cause great destruction. These invaders included the Visigoths, the Huns, the

Germans, the Persians, the Slavs, and the Avars.

By the late 400s A.D., Rome was completely overrun by these outside forces and ceased to function as an empire. In 476 A.D., the German soldier Odoacer captured the city of Rome and killed the emperor. He named himself king of Italy. Many historians consider this the official date of the fall of Rome.