

An Analysis of the Mithraism/Christianity Relationship in Rome And Its Traditional Interpretation

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Before the advent of civilization, early people sought to explain the meaning of their existence in terms of the divine or supernatural. Natural occurrences and other unexplained phenomena were said to be manifestations of gods even before humanity had established itself in permanent settlements or developed the written word. When the movement towards civilization was born, and as it grew stronger, small villages and ancient cities organized themselves around the temple community. From the dawning age of civilization through the present, a myriad of cult religions and belief systems have entered into the human consciousness. While the vast majority of these faiths flourished and faded before the modern age, several have survived the millennia and continue to have profound affects on the topography and relations of societies around the world. Perhaps more than any other deceased religion, Mithraism, throughout the ages, has had the most profound affect on present day faiths such as Christianity and Judaism. The Persian Mysteries, rooted in the nature worship of ancient Iran, managed, by the grace of their marvelous adaptability, to disseminate throughout the ancient world and be assimilated into numerous unrelated societies. After a circuitous and lengthy journey, a fully developed Mithraism entered the Roman Empire and soon rose to the status of state religion. In the heart of ancient Rome, a classic, yet controversial battle was played out between the elder Mithraic tradition and the emerging Christian faith. Despite an established, rich tradition, the exclusivity of the Mithraic brotherhood, the impersonal nature of its savior, and its own tragic adaptability proved to be key elements in the downfall of Mithraism when confronted with the rising popularity and absolute rigidity in faith of the infantile Christian Church. This has been the traditional analysis of Christianity's victory over

Persian paganism, yet it fails to acknowledge the significance of the numerous similarities in doctrine, values, and legends that existed between the two faiths. Due to the analogous nature of the two doctrines, Christianity should no longer be viewed as simply a victor, but rather as a more refined and lasting form of a single, universal tradition that has addressed the basic spiritual needs and hopes so desperately yearned for by humanity since its inception.

Before one can fully appreciate the theological battle that developed between Mithraism and Christianity in Rome, one must first understand the social, political, and religious climate of the Empire. D. Brendan Nagle accurately depicts this environment when he states:

The great cultural diversity of the Empire was reflected in the chaotic variety of religions, cults, philosophies, and theosophies that offered themselves to the inhabitants of the Roman world. There were officially sanctioned and supported state cults that functioned openly and splendidly and small, private groups that met and worshiped in secret. Every taste and every class were accommodated.¹

Truly, in an environment such as this it is difficult to agree with authors who describe the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of Rome at the time. Authors like Arturo Graf, who wrote, "in Rome there was no sacred Book of Morals, no theocratic code," seem to regard the proliferation of foreign cults as a sign of some spiritual failing or emptiness on the part of the Romans.² While it is true that Romans were often given to joining cults of non-Roman origins, the very fact that the ancient Empire could nurture and support such a wide variety of belief systems is a testament to the importance of religion in Roman life. From this plethora of minor cults and deities

large and small, arose Mithraism and Christianity; two minor groups that were to survive political and social unrest for numerous decades, and eventually become dominant religious forces. How these two ideologies sprouted, grew, and eventually confronted each other is as fascinating and controversial an event as any that history provides.

The development of Mithraism from the rustic, Iranian nature worship tradition, to the rich, established cult that rose to prominence in Rome is an intriguing history. All the cultures which Mithraism encountered altered the faith in some way that reflected their own fundamental beliefs concerning humanity, the universe, and the divine. From the well-developed, quasi-scientific system of the Babylonians to the reason of the Greeks, Mithraism adapted itself with perfect chameleon-like ability. As it traveled from country to country, the Mithraic doctrine became increasingly defined and solidified in its teachings. Although each culture imparted its own beliefs on Mithraism, it would be false to say the heart of Mithraism was altered. Throughout its travels, the original Iranian tradition of nature worship remained central to the religion. Franz Cumont succinctly states the relationship of the various cultures that helped create the Mithraism that entered Rome, when he writes:

The basal layer of this religion, its lower and primordial stratum, is the faith of ancient Iran from which it took its origin. Above the Mazdean substratum was deposited in Babylon a thick sediment of Semitic doctrines and afterwards the local beliefs of Asia Minor added to it their alluvial deposits. Finally, a luxuriant vegetation of Hellenic ideas burst from this fertile soil and partly concealed from view its true original nature.³

Thus Mithraism entered Rome as yet another foreign cult to cross into the west as a result of the vast conquests. However, Mithraism presented a doctrine that differed greatly from the festive or familial cults that populated the Empire. Instead of offering yet another god to honor with dancing, drinking, and festivals, Mithraism proclaimed personal salvation and eternal protection for the faithful who were required to lead an almost ascetic-like existence. The faithful believed in the need for repeated bodily cleansings, resisting sensuality, that good arose from action, and that strength and courage were greater than gentleness and tenderness. This demanding new doctrine that offered hope for a better life beyond the grave was readily assimilated into the Roman army. Indeed, Roman soldiers flocked to the protective fold of the sympathetic warrior, Mithra. Roman soldiers, like all soldiers before and since them, faced the constant threat of

death. The kindly, protective doctrine offered by the disciples of Mithra was the perfect assurance of assistance and guidance sought by people who faced such an existence. Often it was the veteran commander of a group of common soldiers who brought his men into the Persian Mysteries. The Brotherhood of Mithra was so influential throughout the army that the soldiers, on the whole, could be described as a pious even superstitious group.⁴

The structure and policies of the army also contributed greatly to the spread of Mithraism. In accordance with Roman policy, soldiers of conquered lands were displaced to other distant regions occupied by the imperial army. This policy provided a natural vehicle for the dissemination of Mithraism as an increasing number of Mithraic lands were conquered during Rome's eastward expansion. Despite being removed from their homelands for twenty years or more, the foreign members of the Roman army usually maintained the religious traditions of their native country, and even offered their faith to those interested. Roman soldiers were also subject to the grand troop movement policies of the Roman government. Upon serving a specified length of time in their homeland, these soldiers were promoted to the rank of centurion and transported to foreign lands. Obviously, once established in these foreign, possibly Mithraic lands, the soldiers would have been forced to encounter once distant theologies. Thus, soldiers who might have never known of the eastern religion, were it not for the policy of continual, massive troop movement, were much more likely to encounter a follower of Mithra among their own ranks, or in the native populace.⁵

Nonmilitary people were also influential agents of Mithra's dissemination. As Rome incorporated an increasingly larger portion of the Middle East, the numerous competent tradesmen of this region found grand opportunities opening up to their business. Again, like the movement of soldiers from their homelands to the outskirts of the empire, merchants from the conquered eastern lands traversed all regions of the empire and worked to spread their native religion. Mithraism also counted among its members a large number of slaves. There existed in ancient Rome a booming slave trade throughout its territories, as new lands were conquered and more people taken under Roman control. Slaves of both Romans and successful foreigners alike faced a difficult life of hardship without end. They too, like the soldiers, took solace in the warm embrace of Mithra, who promised to free them from their earthly toils and reward his faithful with eternal paradise. Although Mithraism began as a religion that populated the outskirts of the empire, it soon permeated the entire territory, especially concentrating in maritime cities with their high

numbers of foreign merchants and slaves.⁶

Although Mithraism presented an empathy and hope for eternal peace for the common soldier, slave, and wealthy aristocrat, such a doctrine was a rarity among Roman cults. However, the doctrine of Mithraism was not entirely unique since the teachings and doctrine of the early Christian church were strikingly similar, if not in some instances identical. The early church offered hope and salvation to the faithful of all social and economic status as well. Just as Mithraism flourished among the ranks of the Roman army, so too did Christianity spread rapidly among the lower, oppressed classes. However, again like Mithraism, Christianity itself did not attempt to limit its teachings to the lowly, but offered them freely to rich and poor alike. For both traditions, faith, not status, was the most important factor in a person's acceptance by the religion. To discover the causes of these, and many other similarities between the two religions, one must first journey back to ancient Babylon where both theologies found the basis for a great deal of their doctrine.

The Babylonian civilization was advanced scientifically, well beyond the simpler cultures of the Jews and Iranians. Their pseudo-scientific system had a profound effect on the rudimentary nature worship of the Iranian magi. Their primitive tradition was assimilated with the advanced astrological ideas of the Babylonians, resulting in the alignment of Iranian gods with the focal planets and suns of the Chaldeans. It was in this fashion that the Supreme Deity of the Iranians, Ahura Mazda, and the Judeo-Christian God became associated with the heavens, and Mithra with the sun. The Babylonians also introduced the doctrine of Fatality, or destiny, by which the Supreme Deity organized and governed the universe.⁷ However, the influence of the Babylonian period had profound effects on the two developing religions that went beyond these simplistic examples. Previous to the Babylonian Captivity, the ideas of resurrection, everlasting life, and a day of final judgment were unknown to Jewish culture.⁸ The theological views of the Babylonians, in the form of Zoroastrianism, had a similar effect on the unformed, early version of Mithraism. This common root played a significant role in the development of two traditions that hold Sunday as a sacred day of worship, possess a categorical system of ethics, view asceticism and denial as meritorious, and count abstinence, continence, renunciation, and self control among the virtues. The faithful of both theologies are baptized and receive through confirmation the powers necessary to combat evil, and through the Lord's Supper gain the salvation of body and soul.⁹ In practice, the two faiths broke with tradition by moving the place of worship from the

temple to a smaller, private, communal worship area (i.e. the Mithraeum and church).¹⁰ Moreover, Author Esme Wynne-Tyson sees a connection between Joseph and his twelve brothers and the grain producing, life sustaining Sun God and the twelve Signs of the Zodiac.¹¹ Both religions drew many of their basic views of humanity and the divine from Zoroastrianism: the first to preach a dualistic, antagonistic relationship between good and evil.

Like the Zoroastrianism of the Babylonians, both Christianity and Mithraism are based on a dualistic world view in which a single god of good constantly battles the forces of evil. The highest divinity in Mithraism was Boundless Time, or Ahura Mazda. Although it had no true physical form, the Supreme Deity of Mithraism was depicted in human form with the head of a lion and encompassed by a large serpent. In its hands it held the scepter and lightning bolts symbolic of divine sovereignty. It was a winged creature with the signs of the Zodiac inscribed on its body.¹² The Supreme Deity, like Yahweh of the early Christians, was opposed by the god of the Underworld, Ahriman or Satan. Whatever the name, the King of Hell reigned over the perverted monsters and demons beneath the earth. Interestingly, in both traditions the God of the Damned was less powerful than the God of Good. Even more, the followers of both early Christianity and Mithraism believed the evil god to have once been the favorite of the Supreme Deity. Both Ahriman and Satan held favored seats in the House of the Lord, yet were cast out from Paradise due to their own vanity and selfishness. Clearly, the very foundations of each religion are strikingly analogous. However, the similarities extend even further than this basic world view. The creation stories of the universe, humanity, and the births of Mithra and Jesus Christ further reveal the extent of these similarities.

The creation of the universe known to humans occurred after the birth of Mithra, when Ahura Mazda sent the first sacred Bull down from Heaven which he commanded Mithra to slay. The imagery of the Bull is significant in that the Persian word for Bull means life. The Bull could also date back as far as 3000 years before the Christian Era to the conjunction of the Sun and the Sign of the Bull at the vernal equinox.¹³ According to John M. Robertson, the Bull has in the past symbolized the earth, the moon, the Bull of the Zodiac, and the "cosmogenic Bull of the Magian System."¹⁴ With a heavy heart, the dutiful Mithra diligently searched for the Bull, which he eventually found in a cave. Upon attacking the Bull, a great battle ensued, with Mithra being the ultimate victor. The sacrifice of the Bull released fertility throughout the earth, bringing forth an abundance of animal and plant life. The evil Ahriman attempted to defile Ahura Mazda's creation by

sending the snake, scorpion, lizard, frog, and dog to drink the blood and consume the flesh of the Bull.¹⁵ Although the myths do not align perfectly, the impetus for the creation of the universe clearly stemmed from both the Christian and Mithraic Gods of Good. It was the Christian god that created the land, the sea, and the sky, and all the creatures that dwell within, just as all the creatures of Earth flowed from the carcass of the slain Bull sent by Ahura Mazda. Whether from a sacred animal or six days of divine labor, all that humanity knows of its universe was the direct result of the actions of a benevolent, supreme god.

The stories of the two theologies concerning the advent of humanity also share many basic concepts and images. According to the Mithraic legend, humanity was created when the Supreme Deity sent another sacred Bull to the earth. However, Ahriman sought to defile this creation of Ahura Mazda and slew the Bull. Yet from the blood of the Bull arose a single couple from whom all humanity was born. Ahriman's machinations were not thwarted however, as he further tempted the woman with gifts of milk and fruit thus corrupting the purity of the Supreme Deity's creation.¹⁶ Obviously, the archetype of the primordial couple is common to both religions. Again, from the direct action of the God of Good, the ancestral parents of all people were born alone in a world of paradise. Similarly, the female in each couple is approached by the God of Evil, whose temptations of fruit were too much for the early couple to resist. With this action, paradise is lost for the couple and all of humanity. Although the Mithraic legend does not mention Ahriman coming disguised as a snake, the imagery of his snakes and frogs attempting to spoil the first sacred Bull is evidence of the commonality of the snake as an agent of evil.

Although the Fall from Eden of Adam and Eve in the Christian tradition is cited as the introduction of sin and suffering into the world, pain and sin had already entered the world long before the arrival of the primordial couple according to the Mithraic doctrine. According to myth, the agents of evil rose out of the bowels of earth in an attempt to usurp heaven and its inhabitants. Although they were defeated, the demons remained on earth and were the cause of misery and pain. This minor discrepancy, however, highlights another source of similarity between the two faiths; that of the existence of the soul and the final judgment. Mithraists believed the souls of heaven descended in order to battle the evil on earth. When a person dies, his or her soul is fought over by the forces of good and those of evil. In both traditions, the ultimate fate of the soul is decided by judgment of its earthly existence and is then delivered unto the proper

realm. Souls that entered the Mithraic Heaven passed through seven levels each guarded by angels. As they passed through a level they were stripped of their outer garments and earthly desires until they were finally stripped naked and merged with Heaven.¹⁷ This is clearly synonymous with the ascendancy of the Christian soul to heaven and the achievement of complete peace, free from earthly suffering, and the eventual unity with God. The legends of both traditions continue by proclaiming the struggle between good and evil will eventually end. Ahriman and the demons of Hell will succeed in destroying the world, but Ahura Mazda will send a Bull and Mithra will redescend to earth to awaken all men to new life. All humanity will be judged and the good will be separated from evil. Mithra will immolate the Bull and feed the good with its fat and wine while destroying the wicked with fire.¹⁸ Again, despite technical differences, the final judgment awaiting Mithraists is identical in nature and purpose with the Christian final judgment. Analogous to Mithra, Christ will redescend to earth bringing with him the salvation and wrath of his father. The souls of the dead will be resurrected and punished, or rewarded accordingly.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, are the similarities between Mithra and Christ themselves. The births of the two saviors, aside from both being celebrated on 25 December, share many other similarities. According to the Mazdaean doctrine, before any plant, animal, or human had been created, a great light shone down from Heaven and birthed Mithra from the solid rock that was the universe. He entered the universe naked, holding a knife and torch symbolic of his role as warrior and illuminator. Christ is also depicted as being both a warrior and illuminator, yet one who came to earth, much like Mithra, as a naked, helpless babe. Neither was born into luxury, but rather the harsh reality of life: Christ in an animal stall, and Mithra in the wild, under a tree. When they saw the great light that shown forth upon the birth of both Mithra and Christ, a group of lowly shepherds came to see the event and worshipped the newborn lord. Soon after his birth, Mithra traveled the land and eventually encountered the Sun, whom he defeated in battle. Instead of vanquishing his opponent, Mithra allied himself with the Sun and the two became almost synonymous with one another.¹⁹ Although Christ did not immediately travel the land as Mithra had, he too lived compassionately, taking pity on his enemies. When their work on earth was done, each divinity gathered their twelve faithful followers together and, after sharing a Last Supper with them, ascended back to heaven with his father.

The followers of Mithraism and Christianity worshipped their divine leader as the God of Light,

protector of truth, "antagonist of falsehood and terror," the bringer of abundance and health, destroyer of evil, and ally of the faithful who sees, hears, and knows all from his reign with Ahura Mazda or Yahweh in Heaven. In this manner, they are sometimes viewed as emanations of the Supreme Deity, in essence, a part of Yahweh or Ahura Mazda. Mithra was the greatest genii through which Ahura Mazda protected his creation and worked to defeat the evils of Ahriman, just as it was through Christ that God worked to restore paradise on earth for the faithful Christians. It is with this understanding, that both Christ and Mithra came to be worshiped as mediators between Heaven and earth, between Heaven and Hell. Mithra was said to have inhabited a Middle Zone between Heaven and Hell from which he acted as the mediator between an unknowable god and the suffering, painful existence of humanity.²⁰ In describing the dualistic system of Mithraism and the role of Mithra in that system, Plutarch writes "The former (Ahura Mazda) he asserts is of all natural phenomena most closely akin to the light, the latter (Ahriman) to darkness, and that Mithra holds an intermediate position."²¹ Truly, whatever has been written about Mithra can apply directly to the role of Christ, whose specific purpose was to bring God's lost children back into his paradise.

Despite the close theological relationship of Mithraism and early Christianity, disciples of neither tradition acknowledged the legitimacy of the other, and the Christian church even went so far as to openly persecute and defame Mithraic worshipers and structures. Surprisingly, the two had coexisted within the confines of the Roman Empire for many years without open conflict. Since Christianity existed predominantly in Asia Minor and Syria and Mithraism populated Europe, natural contact between the two was quite limited until increased travel and growth in the Empire forced them to confront each other. Once unavoidable contact was established, several key characteristics of Christianity and Roman imperial policy greatly affected the conflict. Christianity had spread as a result of the Jewish Diaspora, and was at first a religion based predominantly along coastal cities. More importantly, the movement from the cities and into the interior of the empire was the result of concerted, conscious missionary efforts. Unlike Mithraism, Christianity spread not as a result of social and political trends, but solely on the efforts of its disciples, regardless of the cultural climate of the time.²² This adamant refusal to be swayed in action by the persecution or support of governments or foreign traditions was the single most important factor in Christianity's conflict with Rome and Mithraism alike. Where as Mithraism's willingness to

adapt to new environments won it great favor throughout the Empire, Christianity's unrelenting refusal to change brought upon it the wrath of Roman government. Cumont believes that as the Christian annoyance worsened, Rome allied itself with the Church's greatest enemy, Mithraism.²³ This is a rather limited view of the religious history that disregards a key element in the alliance of Mithraism and the Roman government. This element is the simple fact that, long before the rise of Christianity, emperors, rulers, and aristocrats alike were attracted to the powerful, militaristic Persian deity in which they found justification for oligarchic, or autocratic rule. Unlike Cumont's argument, the attraction that Mithraism held for the power elite existed well before the rise of Christianity. However, regardless of the reasons behind it, as the Christian church struggled to become an increasingly powerful presence, a full-scale conflict with the entrenched Mithraism was unavoidable.

Although the Church was heavily persecuted by the Romans, it did not show any mercy or compassion towards its religious rival. In his book *De Corona Militis*, the Christian apologist Tertullian writes: "We may recognize the craft of the devil, who counterfeits divine things to turn us from our faith and bring us into condemnation."²⁴ Indeed the fathers of the Christian Church were always searching for some new heresy to pin on the Mithraists. Early on, the Church stated that the Mithraic doctrine had imitated that of Christianity. When that could not be supported, they switched to claim that the "Mithraic Devils" had anticipated the Church rites in order to discredit them.²⁵ Later Christian apologists called the similarities "Satanic Travesties."²⁶ Magic, soothsaying, astrology, oracles, and divination, all intricately involved in the development of Mithraism, were thought by the early Church to be, in fact, the inventions or creations of demons.²⁷ As the author Esme Wynne-Tyson states:

Therefore none of these religious similarities should disturb the educated man, although it is quite easy to see how men in a less informed age would be shaken and horrified at discovering in a rival Faith the stories of Adam and Eve, the Flood, the Ark, and of Moses causing water to burst from a rock. Small wonder that it seemed as though devils had been at work.²⁸

The early Christians went beyond simply discrediting, in writing, Mithraism as a heresy. Scores of Mithraeum were systematically destroyed and desecrated. Most often this was done by the ritual murder of Mithraic priests within the Mithraeum

itself and then sealing the body in the temple. Mithraic temples were not the only object of the destructive sights of the Church. Truly, any Mithraic artifact was summarily destroyed when discovered, so as to rid the world of this pagan heresy.²⁹ This could not have been a small, quite private battle between two religious groups by any means. The conflict took place in homes, temples, public streets, and government buildings. The significance of the outcome of this conflict was to have drastic consequences for many people, and this fact was not lost on the Roman public. In AD 177, before the Christian/Mithraism conflict had come to a head, the early Roman writer, Celsus, had already pitted the doctrines of the two religions against each other in his work, *True Discourse*. Although Mithraism went on to reach its height during the end of the third century and beginning of the fourth century AD, the battle at the Milvian Bridge on the Tiber river (AD 312), brought Christ into Rome behind Constantine's ultimate triumph.³⁰ Yet even as Christians were eradicating Mithraism, the Roman wealthy remained true to the Mithra of their ancestors.³¹

Ultimately in the course of history, Mithraism fell among the ranks of the dead religions of the world, while Christianity went on to shape the events of humankind up to the present. The single largest political blow to Mithraism was, of course, the conversion of Constantine. After this event, Mithraism was only tolerated, and later emperors would openly persecute the eastern religion. Once assured success, the Christian church called for the abolition of idolatry of all forms.³² With the reign of Julian the Apostate, however, Mithraism enjoyed a revival of sorts. An intelligent, mythical believer, Julian felt Mithraism would have to shed many of its primitive aspects and incorporate more philosophical elements if it were ever to become a world religion. Ironically, Julian's dream was cut short by a Persian assassin. After Julian's death, there was a brief period of tolerance, but with the emperor Gratian (AD 382), all state support for the once magnificent cult was ended. Then, in AD 391, the emperor Theodosius proclaimed an edict that forbade all pagan worship and attendance of pagan temples. Finally, in AD 392 there came a second edict that made all forms of pagan worship, public and private, open to persecution. Truly, the religion of the Romans had always developed within the framework of politics.³³ When the Roman government finally turned from Mithraism, it was only a matter of time before it would meet its final end.

Yet, as damaging as the change in Roman political mood was to the Mithraic doctrine, it was not the most profound reason for its failure. Even the

conversion of Constantine was not quite the awesome event that it is held to be, as H. Doerries wrote in his biography of the emperor, "politics were for him determined by religion, and religion determined by politics."³⁴ Mithraism failed due to three significant faults in its doctrine. Although chastity was held as meritorious by both traditions, for Mithraism it was not an end in and of itself, but rather a simple conservation of energy. For the Mithraist, women were a temptation to be avoided.³⁵ Thus women were virtually banned from the cult. Even though it hoped for a universal religion, Mithraism still preached the "esoteric and exoteric exclusion of women."³⁶ Surely a religion that summarily excluded half the human race could not have hoped to survive. As an alternative to this, the Christian church was not exclusively male. It allowed the presence of women at its functions and welcomed them completely into its arms.³⁷ Biblical authors such as Luke, often worked diligently to convey God's love for man and woman equally. Luke taught that Jesus' ministry was to free the oppressed, and that women were one of the most oppressed groups in need of divine aid. Luke often stressed Jesus' compassion for women of all backgrounds: widows, the poor, prostitutes, and mothers. In his book, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, Witherington states: "Perhaps Luke has a concern to show that the Word goes out to men and women of all social classes."³⁸ Flender continues, as he writes, "Luke expresses by this arrangement (his use of male-female parallelism) that man and woman stand together and side by side before God. They are equal in honor and grace; they are endowed with the same gifts and have the same responsibilities. . . ."³⁹ Truly, the early Church far surpassed Mithraism in its radical, progressive stance on gender issues.

Throughout its life history, Mithraism's great adaptability to new social and political environments had proved to be a marvelous asset. Yet, when confronted with the stalwart, unfaltering faith of the Christian church in its own doctrine, Mithraism seemed weak and unformed. Where as Mithraism simply melded with Roman culture, the nonlinear and often contradictory nature of Christianity demanded confrontation. It required its followers to give something more than Mithraism. For in giving this, the faithful were rewarded with something more meaningful than that offered by Mithraism. To the ancient people, the Christian texts were alive, passionate and uncompromised, while the Mithraic texts fell flat and were continually altered and modified. As the Christian body grew strong and persecution heightened, faithfulness and devotion to the church only strengthened. Salvation was a community issue for the Christian church, not an

individual commitment as in Mithraism. From the chaotic, disorganized nature of the early Christian church a unified struggle for concrete community was revealed.⁴⁰

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the fundamental difference between Jesus Christ and Mithra. Both were compassionate and benevolent saviors who would punish the wicked as soon as they would deliver the faithful unto Heaven. Yet, Jesus Christ was a living, suffering human who had actually existed in some of the very places where his followers now tread. Mithra was a mythical god. As kind and protecting as he could have been, his sufferings and sacrifices and were mythological. Where as Christ had truly lived, faith in Mithra was ultimately based upon a long tradition of legend and myth. As Robin Lane Fox mentions in his book, *Pagans and Christians*, mystery cults offered myths of god, while the Judeo-Christian tradition offered history. Where as pagan mysteries conveyed a secret experience, the early church offered a "revelation" based on texts.⁴¹ Jesus was also a mediator between God and humanity, yet Mithra, according to the legends, was simply a mediator between good and evil. In the Mithraic doctrine, there exists no human element, no passionate love that can exist only between two people who share common experiences. In short, the goodness of Mithra was no match for the goodness of Christ the living, passionate human, who suffered and died on the cross.⁴²

Perhaps the analysis of the events of Roman religious history would not be so controversial if the reasons for Christianity's ultimate triumph were as simple and definite as above. However, like many events in world history, the act of gleaning any meaning or deciphering the true nature of a relationship is difficult at best. The problem presented by a historical analysis of the Mithraism/Christian struggle begins at the very core of the commonly held view that Christianity did indeed eventually triumph over Mithraism. To make such a statement is not only dangerous, but it is also ignorant, revealing a general lack of understanding of the situation existing in the Empire at the time. Despite the power Christianity eventually acquired, to deny the influence and strength of Mithraism and its faithful is woefully incorrect. In the time before Christianity, Mithraism had risen to the rank of official state cult, a position achieved by few traditions before or since. It was popular amongst the

rich and poor alike, and within the Roman army was virtually all-powerful. Any religion given the opportunity to usurp this powerful theology would have been required to make a multitude of compromises and alterations in order to even hope to attract the faithful of another cult. Although the early church was rigidly faithful to its core belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the son of God, it had to make numerous concessions to the Mithraic doctrine and adopt Mithraic practices and concepts as its own. Thus Christians celebrate the birth of Christ on the same day as that of Mithra's birth 25 December. The 25th is clearly a date of Mithraic significance in that it corresponds to the winter solstice which was worshiped as the Nativity of the Sun. The early church also lacked a collection of hymns, which were popular in the Mithraic tradition. Thus the earliest hymns of the church are actually based on Mithraic tunes combined with altered Christian lyrics.⁴²

Finally, Christian founders were "keen to include in their faiths all the sublime values and beautiful ideals appealing to human conscience mind," values and ideals previously embodied in the Mithraic tradition.⁴³ This statement suggests that regardless of its specific beliefs and concepts, Christianity is not merely indebted to, but simply an emanation of a grander, basic set of values, needs, and beliefs within the collective human consciousness. The technical similarities in beliefs and legends might reveal the possibility of the relationship, but such an interrelatedness extends deeper, beyond all differences and similarities in form and belief. The shared basic idea of a compassionate, all-powerful, cosmic god in whose protective fold the faithful can find inner peace and eternal salvation speaks more loudly than any differences in its earthly character. The seemingly universal need for divinity in a persons daily life points to a much closer relationship between Mithraism and Christianity than ever before postulated in a historical, social, or even religious context. Thus the ultimate religious history in Rome is not so much the triumph of Christianity over Mithraism, but rather a refinement of a common, spiritual human need into a more permanent form that has continued for almost two millennia. Only when this vital element in the Christianity/Mithraism conflict is understood can scholars move past the desire to proclaim a victor, and focus on the history and development of these universal needs regardless of their earthly form.

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Endnotes

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