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Why did people choose for the Jesus-Movement?

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The must have been critical factors that made the growth of Christianity possible.

What factors made it possible for Christianity to grow from 0 to 10 per cent of the population of the Roman Empire in the year 300, and even to 50 per cent in the year 350? By the end of the first century hardly any of the 60 million people of the Roman Empire were Christians. How did they manage to reach the major milestone of 10 per cent in the year 300? Five factors are very important in this regard, namely, (1) The apostle Paul was an excellent advocate to promote the christian message. (2) His voyages, his frequent visits to several christian communities, his epistles and his rules of life enabled him to create a 'world wide web' of christian communities that were recognisable as such for every traveller. (3) At the time monotheism was more attractive than the polytheism of the ancient Greek times. 4. The universalism preached by Paul (Gl. 3:28) was attractive as well. (5) The emperor Julian (the Apostate) recognised that christians surpassed everyone else with respect to philanthropy. According to him, only if the priests of other religions followed suit would it be possible for their 'gentile' religions to survive.

Introduction

In the first three centuries of our era the number of Christians grew to 10% of the population of the Roman Empire in the year 300 (cf. Stark 1996:7). Shortly thereafter, 50% of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire belonged to the Christian congregations that were spread throughout the Roman territory.

In the first centuries of the Common Era there was a whole range of cults, religions, and philosophies.[1] In Philippi alone we know of more than a dozen deities or demigods that were venerated, such as Silvanus, Artemis, Apollo, Isis, Dionysus, the Thracian Horseman, and Kabeiros (Pilhofer 1995:137–139). We can deduce from some inscriptions that several Philippians venerated more than one deity.[2] Apuleius, a second-century author living in the northern part of Africa, tells us that he himself had participated in very many initiatory rites of holy ceremonies in Greece,[3] and such phenomena can be observed more often.[4] In one of the well-known magical papyri from Egypt it is said: I swear to you by the God of the Hebrews, Jesus. A few lines further we read ἐπεύχομαι ἅγιον θεὸν ἐπὶ Ἄμμων (I pray to the holy God invoking Ammon) (Preisendanz & Henrichs 1973:170–171). This third-century papyrus makes it clear that even then some people had no problem to invoke deities representing different religions. In 409 the controversial patriarch of Alexandria, Theophilus, invited the Neo-Platonic philosopher Synesius to become bishop of Ptolemaïs. Synesius wrote then his famous open letter in which he stated that he would not be separated from his wife and that he would not forsake his own convictions: οὐκ ἀξιῶ προσποιεῖσθαι δόγματα, ταῦτα θεόν, ταῦτα ἀνθρώπους μαρτύρομαι (I refuse to submit myself to dogmas; I declare this for God and for people).[5] Theophilus and the Christian community of Ptolemaïs accepted his conditions, and so the Christian community had a bishop who himself was a Neo-Platonist. Bishop Pegasius of Ilion could be mentioned here as well, if we may trust the information given by the Emperor Julian. Julian writes in an epistle that Pegasius δοκῶν τῶν Γαλιλαίων ἐπίσκοπος, ἠπίστατο σέβεσθαι καὶ τιμᾶν τοὺς θεούς, (apparently a bishop of the Galileans

1. The word 'cult' is most often, but not exclusively, used for rituals that are performed for a deity, whereas the term 'religion' generally refers to the whole of dogmas and rituals such as those of the Christian religion. The noun 'philosophy' was also sometimes used for a religion or a cult.

2. See for example the inscriptions numbered 276, 455a, 514 in Pilhofer (2009:337–338, 533–534, 610–611).

3. Apuleius, *Apologia* 55,8: sacrorum pleraque initia in Graecia participavi.

4. See for example Vidmann (1969:252, number 543) for an inscription that mentions a priest who served in two different cults: he was 'sacerdos Isidis Ostens(is) et M(atris) d(eum) Trastib(erinae)'.

5. See Synesius' letter 105 in Garzya (1979:184–190; the quotation is from p. 189).

knew how to worship and revere the gods) (Bidez 1924:85). Another phenomenon confirms that the lines that separate different cults were vague. An inscription found in Philippi, and dating from the second or third century CE mentions that the officials of the deity Suregethes should give double the disposed money as a fine to the members of the association of the Thracian Horseman, if the officials of Suregethes did not fulfil the appointed rituals with respect to a deceased man (Pilhofer 2009:157–160, number 133).

The number of members of the Christian church had grown explosively in the first half of the fourth century at the expense of other religions. What had made Christianity more attractive than other religions in these 350 years? Any cult, religion, or philosophy of life starts as a quest for the meaning of life and is meant to 'provide answers to the ultimate questions of life and death' (Droogers 2012:80–81). It can be expected, then, that the answers given to these questions are not very different. Accordingly any religion shows a certain continuity and a certain discontinuity with other religions, providing similar answers as well as different ones. Continuity between Christianity and other religions can easily be indicated on several points, there were sufficient similarities to make the Christian religion acceptable. But this continuity cannot be the reason why people joined Christianity. In other words, it must have been the divergent elements of the Christian religion that convinced people to switch to Christianity. It is plausible that discontinuity was the reason why people chose to join the Christian religion.

In this article I will confine myself especially to Philippi. Why did people in Philippi join the Jesus-Movement? Can we find historical reasons for the fact that Christianity shut out other concepts of life although it adopted several elements from them? I will briefly discuss three religions or cults that played a role in Philippi at the beginning of the Common Era: the religion of Isis, the religion of Dionysus, and the cult of the Kabeiroi.[6] The latter cult is included because it played an important role in the development of Christianity in Philippi. Then I will discuss some differences and similarities in comparison with Christianity.

The religion of Isis

Originally, the Egyptian goddess Isis was well-known throughout the Roman Empire. Temples or shrines were built in many cities. In the Philippian territory ten inscriptions have been found that mention Isis, three in Greek, and seven in Latin.[7] This makes clear that the cult of Isis was attractive for both Greek- and Latin-speaking people. These inscriptions show that a sanctuary was made for Isis at the acropolis of Philippi.[8] At least three persons are mentioned as *sacerdos* or ἱερεύς (priest). The longest inscription has been made on a stela by order of the physician Quintus Mofius Euhemerus (Pilhofer 2009:153–156, number 132). This inscription was found at the Neapolis gate. The connection of this physician with the cult of the goddess Isis is not at all striking, because she was well-known for her healing power (cf. Klauck 2003:132–133), and she was venerated as the goddess who could give people immortality (Diodorus Siculus I.25,6). In this inscription she is also associated with the prosperity (*salus*) of Philippi.[9] In another inscription found at the Neapolis gate, it is Jesus, the saviour (σωτήρ), who promises peace (εἰρήνη) for all citizens and for the city (Pilhofer 2009:149–153, number 131). In a third inscription Jesus is asked to support the city and its inhabitants (Pilhofer 2009:148–149, number 130). It seems certain that the inscription by Quintus Mofius Euhemerus was erected at the acropolis, in or next to the sanctuary of Isis, in the second or third century CE. It was, however, excavated at the Neapolis gate, at the exact place where the other inscriptions were found. It measures 1.8 by 1.1 by 0.7 meters and is rather heavy. Did the Christians bring down this heavy stone, and did they place it next to the gate in order to bring about 'salus' for Philippi? It seems so (cf. Brélaz 2014:118). The inscription itself is left intact, but two Christian symbols were made on one side, a cross and a dove. In this way the pagan inscription was more or less Christianised. But did the Christians not consider it to be offensive for Jesus the saviour, that the inscriptions that mention him would be erected next to the inscription that refers to Isis? It is impossible to draw any certain conclusion from this phenomenon, but it is at least remarkable that an inscription was moved from the sanctuary of Isis to the Neapolis gate, apparently in the hope that this inscription would better protect the city against disasters. It is impossible to date the repositioning of this inscription. It is clear that it was not needed anymore at Isis' sanctuary. Did this sanctuary no longer function? Or was the cult of Isis already forbidden at the time? We do not know. In any case, people considered it important to erect this stela next to the city gate and to add the two Christian symbols.

Another inscription from Philippi mentions Isis. It was found on a sarcophagus that was excavated in Doxato, a small city 10 kilometres to the north of Philippi. It is striking that the inscription is divided into two parts by a relief of the Heros Aulonitis (Pilhofer 2009:533–534, number 455a). This most probably means that the commissioning party thought it appropriate to honour both Isis and the Heros Aulonitis with the inscription and the relief on this sarcophagus. This inscription is one of the examples of people who venerated more than one deity.

People who wanted to join the cult of Isis had to be initiated according to specific rules, such as bathing and fasting

6. I do not discuss the cult of Mithras here because there is not any trace of Mithras in Philippi.

7. Pilhofer (2009:153–156, 226–228, 239–241, 241–242, 243, 317–319, 321–322, 533–534, 584–585, 710–712. The numbers of these inscriptions are 132, 175, 190, 191, 192, 252, 255, 455a, 506 and 581.

8. See for example Pilhofer (2009:226–228, number 175).

9. This stela is devoted to Isis 'pro salute col(oniae) Iul(iae) Aug(ustae) Philippiens(is)'. See Abrahamsen (1995:185–187), Bormann (1995:59).

(Apuleius, Metamorphoses XI.23.). The adherents of the cult of Isis were supposed to live in an ethically proper way in order to receive the benefactions she could give (Heyob 1975:119–127). In Kyme, in Asia Minor, a famous aretalogy of Isis was found in which the attributes of the deity are listed. It dates from the second century CE. Another was found in Maroneia in the north-east of Greece, dating from the second or first century BCE. 'These aretalogies appear to be derived from a common source in Egypt' (Horsley 1976:12). Next to other statements it is said that Isis issued laws in order to stop murder and that she put strong emphasis on justice (Horsley 1976:18–21). It is evident that such a text incited her disciples to live according to Isis' rules.

An intriguing aspect of Isis was that she knew suffering. Her husband Osiris was murdered, but she had been able to revive him. Because of her sorrow and her power to give new life to Osiris she was thought to be able to console people in their suffering and to help them in their needs.[10]

The adherents of the cult of Isis hoped that she would bestow good health, that she would give consolation, that she would grant an afterlife to her followers and that she would protect the city against calamities.[11] People who adhered to this religion gathered near a sanctuary. Her followers were supposed to live according to her rules of righteousness.

The religion of Dionysus

Dionysus is 'the most polymorphous of the Greek gods' (Klauck 2003:107). A sanctuary dating from pre-Greek times was found in the Pangaion Hills and another one was excavated in Drama. Originally Dionysus was connected with wine, with ecstasy, and with frenzy, but later a variety of rituals was adopted, such as sacrifices and dinners and other rituals that we know from other religions (cf. Klauck 2003:116–117; Bowden 2010:112,121,133) Dionysus was identified with the Roman deity Liber Pater.[12] In many cities there were religious associations of people who venerated Dionysus, although there were many differences between locally organised cults (Merkelbach 1988:15). Such an association could be called a θίασος (Latin, thiasus).[13] In Pilhofer's catalogue of Pilhofer, 23 inscriptions are important for us in this regard. Seven inscriptions from Philippi's territory mention Dionysus and fourteen inscriptions refer to Liber Pater. In one inscription Dionysus is called Bromius, and in another Bacchus.[14] Recently a hitherto unknown inscribed stone was found in Drama in the sanctuary of Dionysus. This inscription from the second century BCE states that some people dedicated this mark of honour to Διόνυσος Σωτήρ (Dionysus the saviour).[15]

According to the Greek traditions, Dionysus could appear in the form of an animal (Euripides's *Bacchae* 100, 1017–1018), and was supposed to be present in wine. The eating of sacrificial raw flesh and the drinking of wine may mean that his devotees thought to imbibe the deity by eating meat and drinking wine (Ferguson 2003:261; Klauck 2003:110–111). It is even said in Euripides's *Bacchae* that Dionysus σπένδεται θεὸς γεγώς, ὥστε διὰ τοῦτον τἀγάθ' ἀνθρώπους ἔχειν (was poured out so that through him the people would receive well-being) (Euripides, Bacchae, 284–285). Especially Dionysus's connection with the vine reminded his followers of their mortality and of the new life that returned annually. In the church of the Holy Athanasios in Doxato an inscription was found that describes the afterlife as an enduring happy banquet (Pilhofer 2009:516–521, number 439). Here the name Bromius is used for the deity who grants this felicitous afterlife.[16] This inscription is dated in the third century CE.

An inscription from Photolibos, 25 kilometres north-west of Philippi, says that the adherents of Bacchus should arrange an annual dinner in memory of a deceased woman (Pilhofer 2009:635–636, number 529). An inscription that was found in Podochori, about 40 kilometres south-west of Philippi at the edge of Philippi's territory, tells that the patron left 120 denars to the initiates of Dionysus in order to arrange offerings once a year (Pilhofer 2009:730–732, number 597). This stone contains a relief with the Thracian Horseman as well. It shows again that some people had connections with more than one deity. It is clear from these inscriptions that some officials of Dionysus were responsible for annual rituals at the tomb of a deceased person.

Five of the inscriptions mentioned above were found in a building south of the forum in Philippi, excavated in the thirties of the last century. Eventually it became evident that this complex was at least partly dedicated to Liber, Libera, and Hercules. It was dated in the third century CE. Accordingly, the cult of Dionysus was still alive in the third century. As far as the other inscriptions can be dated, they stem from the fourth century BCE until the third century CE. It is difficult then to agree with the statement by Merkelbach that the religion of Dionysus 'im zweiten und dritten nachchristlichen Jahrhundert veraltet war' (Merkelbach 1988:198). In the Philippian territory we have more inscriptions regarding the religion of Dionysus than any other religion in the first three centuries CE, and nothing indicates the decline of Dionysus's cult. It is significant that a new complex was built for the adherents of this cult in the third century.

Five of the mentioned Philippian inscriptions show a relation with another deity, four with Hercules and one with Silvanus.

10. Merkelbach even says (1995:317): 'Eine göttliche Mutter gewährt Trost. Hier lag eine Stärke der Religion um Isis. Die Christen haben im Konzil zu Ephesos 431 den Marienkult eingeführt, um diese Lücke zu schliessen'.

11. Isis is called Σώτειρα in a second century inscription found at Rhodes; see Vidmann (1969:104, number 179); and see Merkelbach (1995:98) for more examples of Isis as Σώτειρα.

12. Cf. Bruhl (1953:213–215). Herodotus, *Histories* 2.42 and 2.144, identified Dionysos with Osiris, brother and husband to Isis.

13. For the use of the Greek term see Edson (1972:108–109, 165, numbers 260 and 506). See for the Latin thiasus for example the numbers 524, 525 and 529 in Pilhofer (2009:625–628, 628–630, 635–636).

14. See for these inscriptions the index in Pilhofer (2009) on the different names of this deity. I am not counting the fake inscriptions published by Mertzides.

15. See Koukouli-Chrysanthaki (2006:57–74). Cf. Pausanias II.37.2 where Διόνυσος Σαώτης is mentioned. Σαώτης is a poetical form for σωτήρ.

16. Bruhl (1953:313–314). And see the title of the relevant paragraph in Merkelbach (1988:123), 'Die Hoffnung auf Rettung'.

This shows again that different deities were easily connected. Apart from this, Liber is often mentioned next to Libera, in agreement with old Roman traditions.

On the basis of Euripides's *Bacchae* it is often argued that the adherents of Dionysus led a riotous life. The use of the noun *bacchanalia* is telling. In any case, we must reckon with the development of this cult. Euripides wrote his tragedy at the end of the fifth century BCE, and we may assume that things changed during the next four centuries. At the beginning of the Common Era there were strict ethical rules for people who wanted to be initiated in the cult of Dionysus. One of the conditions was 'a 10-day period of fasting and sexual abstinence' (Klauck 2003:116). After the initiation people were bound to live an ethically just life.[17] Celsus is said to compare Bacchic and Christian punishments for those who sinned (Origenes, Contra Celsum IV,10). This evidently means that the adherents of the Dionysus's religion should refrain from sinning. Nevertheless, the adherents of Dionysus had formerly at times indulged in excesses, and in 186 BCE the Roman senate imposed restrictions on their rituals, but the senators did not forbid the religion (Livius, Ab urbe condita 39, 17–18). Consequently, this religion could endure, although in a less extreme form. The famous, luxurious Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii can be seen as an indication that this religion had won more and more adherents in the first century BCE and that wealthy and influential people felt sympathetic to this cult (Bruhl 1953:151–152, 158–159).

In summary, Dionysus was supposed to bestow a happy afterlife to his followers, whereas his followers for their part were expected to live an ethical life. Rituals such as dinners, processions, and sacrifices formed a part of this cult.

The cult of the Kabeiroi

Until today not a single Philippian inscription with respect to the Kabeiroi has been published, in spite of the fact that in 1964, more than 50 years ago, the relevant burial chamber was excavated in the centre of Philippi. In this burial chamber a tomb was found with an inscription that mentions a certain Euephenes, the son of Exekestos (Pilhofer 2009: 392-393, number 327). In 1975, at an archaeological meeting, Pelekanidis announced that the same name was mentioned in a list with initiates from the Kabeiric sanctuary at Samothrace (Pelekanidis 1975:395). But this list has not yet been published. Another unpublished inscription was found under the forum of Philippi and it mentioned a certain Exekestos (Pelekanidis 1975:395–396). Koukouli-Chrysanthaki and Bakirtzis mention an unpublished inscription from Philippi that refers to Euephenes, the son of Exekestos, as an initiate of the Kabeiric cult at Samothrace (Koukouli-Chrysanthaki and Bakirtzis 1995:54). It is clear from these inscriptions that the cult of the Kabeiroi played a role in Philippi (Pelekanidis 1980:107). Euephenes was apparently connected with the Kabeiroi. It is remarkable that the Christians collaborated with adherents of the cult of the Kabeiroi from the beginning of the fourth century. They used the same lot of land for their rituals. Later on, when Christianity had complete authority, the Kabeiric shrine was left intact. Christians took it into use for their own rituals, and they probably continued some of the Kabeiric rituals.[18]

An important element was that initiates were expected to confess their sins before they were allowed to the degree of *epopteia*, the higher grade of initiation (Lehmann 1969:15, 19). Accordingly, ethical requirements must have played a role in this cult. It is said that the initiates lived "more piously and more justly and better in every respect" (Diodorus Siculus V.49,6). Even more important: as in Christianity, everybody could participate in the Kabeiric cult of Samothrace, men and women, slaves and free people alike (Dimitrova 2008:245; Lehmann 1998:37).

There are no clear statements with respect to an afterlife. But some sculptures suggest that the adherents did not consider death as the definite end of life (Lehmann 1998:38, 124–125).

Christianity arose in the midst of these religions

The religions mentioned above originate in different countries (i.e., Egypt, Greece, and Samothrace). Actually, even the religion of Dionysus is not originally Greek; it may have come from Crete or from Asia Minor or Thracia (cf. Bruhl 1953:1–4). Later it integrated several Greek elements, even the Greek name of its deity. Nevertheless, it was already known in Greece in a very early age. Ethical requirements can be stated for these three religions. And in all of them a sort of afterlife seems to have played a role. Of course differences between them can be mentioned as well. But for some people the differences may have been less important. We have seen that the dividing lines between cults or religions were rather vague. Some people joined two or more religions.

In that field a new actor appeared, Christianity. I pass over the complicated relations between Judaism and Christianity. The epistles of Paul show that there were some discernible groups that followed Paul's preaching, probably still under the umbrella of Jewish communities. But what reason could people have to join these new groups? What was the advantage of Christianity over other religions? It is too simple to state that the message preached by Paul was the reason for people to join the small Christian associations. In any case, that is very difficult to prove. Many religions had an idea of some sort of afterlife. Ritual dinners and initiation rites were celebrated in most religious associations. And both the Kabeiric cult of Samothrace and the religion of Isis propagated a sort of universalism. Karl Lehmann even argued that the 'all-inclusive admission made the Samothracian mysteries more like a Christian community than any other phenomenon of Greek religion' (Lehmann 1998:37). This is certainly put too strongly, but the similarities with the Samothracian

17. See Euripides, Bacchae 476: ἀσέβειαν ἀσκοῦντ᾽ ὄργι᾽ ἐχθαίρει θεοῦ, the secret rites of a god abominate who is impious. Cf. the laconic remark of Merkelbach (1988:122): 'In den meisten dionysischen Clubs wurde von den Mitgliedern ein moralisches Leben verlangt, ganz wie in allen anderen religiösen Gemeinschaften'.

18. Elsewhere I described what the Kabeiric cult was like. See Verhoef (2008:698-702); Verhoef (2013:2–13, 71).

mysteries and with other cults are striking. At the end of his book on Dionysus, Reinhold Merkelbach wrote a short paragraph in which he compared the religion of Dionysus with the mysteries of Isis, Mithras, and Christianity. He concluded that especially the latter three 'den religiösen Bedürfnissen der Menschen dieser Zeit entsprachen' (Merkelbach 1988:198). But with respect to the situation in Philippi we can state that Dionysus must have met the needs of many people as well. And the differences between this religion and other religions mentioned by Merkelbach are rather small.

Many elements of the Christian message must have been recognisable for the inhabitants of the Roman Empire. It was for them just another religion with other accents.[19] Some people apparently had reasons to switch to this new religion, but why? Which elements were so convincing that people thought that joining this new religion was a good thing to do? There probably is not one single satisfying answer. It must have been a sum of elements that led to the growth of Christianity in the first three centuries of the Common Era. I would like to mention the following factors:

1. Christ presumably had an excellent advocate in Paul. Paul's epistles indicate that he devoted himself entirely to the preaching of Jesus' message.
2. Very soon Christianity had small centres in many cities.[20] For travellers these Christian centres were recognisable as such. This made Christianity probably more attractive than most religions or cults that had no similar centres in other cities. And there were connections between all these Christian centres, so that there was a 'world wide web'. As far as I know such connections did not exist between other religious centres.[21] These connections may have caused a certain uniformity between the Christian associations. In the Hellenistic world the centres of the same god or goddess in different cities could differ very much from each other. Compare, for example, Artemis in Ephesos with Artemis in Philippi.
3. Christianity was evidently monotheistic, as was the Jewish religion (see Dt. 6:4; Ml 2:10; Mk 12:29; 1 Cor. 8:4, 6; 1 Th. 1:9). In the Greco-Roman world many deities were venerated, and we have seen that at times more than one deity was worshipped simultaneously. Nevertheless, we can surmise that there was a tendency towards monotheism. Merkelbach says: 'In der hellenistischen und römischen Periode gab es die Tendenz, alle Götter auf den Einen zurückzuführen' (Merkelbach 1995:94). Christian preachers did not want to put their God on par with other gods. On the other hand, it is rather hopeless to ask people to totally abandon their familiar beliefs. The idea that the Jewish/Christian God would have power over all facets of life could be helpful in this respect. This God was comprehensive, all-embracing. Such inclusive monotheism could have been very captivating, much more than an excluding form of monotheism. In this last case all other deities must be abjured.
4. The universalism preached by Paul was probably captivating. Everybody could join the new associations without any discrimination. This universalism was not totally new (cf. Neutel (2013:230–231). It was propagated in the Samothracian cult as well. But people then had to make the rather difficult journey to Samothrace in order to be initiated. In Christianity such a geographic obstacle did not exist. Also in the religion of Isis a certain universalism was proclaimed, as can be seen in the so-called aretalogies.[22]
5. For the last point we have 'to consort with the devil'. It is the Emperor Julian the Apostate who explained the growth of Christianity by the benevolence and the benefits of mercy by its members. It was probably in 362 that Julian wrote an epistle to Arsacios, Epistle 84. This Arsacios was a high priest in Galatia. Julian wrote with respect to the Christians that ἡ περὶ τοὺς ξένους φιλανθρωπία καὶ ἡ περὶ τὰς ταφὰς τῶν νεκρῶν προμήθια καὶ ἡ πεπλασμένη σεμνότης κατὰ τὸν βίον (the philanthropy to the foreigners and the forethought for the burials and the pretended moral character during their life) resulted in the growth of Christianity (Bidez 1924:144). Julian says that all the priests should practice such philanthropy.[23]

What made Christianity attractive?

It is clear that point 1 and point 2 are important in order to promote Christianity in the middle of the first century. But these points are certainly not the only reasons why Christianity could grow steadily. It seems to me that points 3 and 4 could convince people that Christianity comprehended older religions and cults. Time and again it is strongly stated in both Judaism and Christianity that there is only one God. Possibly people thought it much more attractive to worship one God who was thought to rule all areas of life than to worship a deity for the time of pregnancy, another one for a sea voyage, and again another one for agriculture. The God of Paul's preaching is said to control all these areas. He is not exclusive but rather inclusive. According to Paul there is only one God, and he controls all things. In 1 Cor. 8:6 he says: for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and to whom we will go. Accordingly, all the areas that were supposedly controlled by the Greek or Roman deities are thought to be subjected to his power. I can imagine that such an inclusiveness could be assessed to be a real improvement.[24]

Monotheism interpreted in this way is narrowly related to universalism. Both concepts, monotheism and universalism, make it evident that everything is subjected to the will of the one God and that all people are equal before God. He does not show any partiality. Paul says in Galatians 3:28: there is

19.Themistius, living in the fourth century, spoke about ἑκατέρα θρησκεία with respect to Christian and non-Christian religion (see his *Orationes* 5:69c).

20.In this respect the new Christian religion could compete with the religion of Isis.

21.Cf. Merkelbach (1988:15),'Ein Verband der Dionysosverehrer, der in der Art der christlichen Kirche zentralisiert gewesen wäre, hat nie existiert'. Witt (1971:272) says with respect to the religion of Isis: 'A deeply centralized hierarchical organization such as marks the Roman Catholic Church seems never to have arisen'.

22.See for example Horsley (1976:10, lines 26–28,19, lines 31–32). Cf. Witt (1971:268).

23.It should be noted that Christianity is pointed to by Julian as ἀθεότης, atheism.

24.Cf. the Qur'an 39:29 where Mohammed says: 'Can a man who has several masters at odds with each other be considered equal to a man devoted wholly to one master?'

no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Similar ideas can be found for example in Acts 10:35; Romans 2:11 and Galatians 2:6.

The adjective καθολικός could be telling in this regard. As far as we know Ignatius is the first Christian author who uses this adjective with respect to the Christian church (see Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans 8.2, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία). What is the meaning of καθολικός in this text? Καθολικός means 'general' or 'universal' (cf. Lampe 1991:690-691). Could it be the case that the universalism preached by Paul, the idea that for God there are no frontiers between people and that this one God has power over all things in the world, and that his concern applies to all people, necessarily leads to the idea of a καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία, meaning only one church that includes all cults and religions? Could it be that these ideas, monotheism and universalism, were factors that led to the steady growth of the small minority groups of Christians? And how do these aspects, monotheism and universalism, relate to the authorities of the Roman Empire? In the beginning the Roman Empire will hardly have been aware of a possible advantage of such ideas, but later the Roman emperors could easily make use of one universal church with one God.[25]

Point 5 in the last section can be summarised with the word 'charity'. It is striking that Emperor Julian in several letters tells that the Christians, the Galileans as he called them, cared for other people, whether or not they were friends. Ἡ περί τοὺς ξένους φιλανθρωπία was mentioned by him as a characteristic of the Christians. At the end of a letter to the high priest Theodoros, Epistula 89, Julian writes συνέβη τοὺς πένητας ἀμελεῖσθαι παρορωμένους ὑπὸ τῶν ἱερέων, it happened that the poor were neglected and were overlooked by the priests. Thereafter, the 'Galileans' undertook this task. Julian, who would reintroduce the ancestral cults, summoned the priests to surpass the Galileans in philanthropy.

According to Deuteronomy 15:7, 11 the Israelites should not be close fisted with respect to the poor, but they should be openhanded for them (cf. Job 29,16; 31,18–19). It is evident that poor relief was expected from the Israelites in the Old Testament. We find similar statements in the New Testament as well; see for example Matthew 19:21; Luke 19:8 and Galatians 2:10. Philanthropy was clearly an important element in both Judaism and Christianity. This is not to say that it always worked out that way. But for Emperor Julian it was evident that Christians excelled in philanthropy although he suspected them of dishonourable intentions. According to him they cared for the poor in order to make converts. Emperor Julian himself had broken with Christianity. He would like to benefit other religions or cults, but nevertheless he mentioned the philanthropy of the Christians and even says that his addressees must follow their example because this philanthropy had made Christianity grow.

25.Cf. Merkelbach (1995:318), 'Schliesslich passte der strenge christliche Monotheismus auch politisch besser zu der absoluten Monarchie, zu welcher das Imperium Romanum sich entwickelt hatte'.

Conclusion

Any religion started as a quest for the meaning of life. Accordingly, the answers given to these questions do not differ very much. People with similar answers gathered, formed religious associations, and founded religions. Later on new religions will have adopted elements and ideas from older religions. This is self-evident because no religion originates in a vacuum. Every new religion arose in the midst of older religions and as a reaction to them. Consequently, any religion shows different answers in comparison with older religions as well as many similarities.

With respect to the growth of Christianity we can see that it adopted several elements from other religions, but it had its own characteristics. Several factors played a role in the victory of Christianity. The apostle Paul himself promoted a uniform Christianity in many cities scattered over the Roman Empire. But also the content of his message of a monotheistic, universalistic God must have been attractive for his audience, and according to Julian, the philanthropy of the Christians attracted people from other religions as well. These factors in themselves are not decisive. It must have been the sum of these factors that has led to the victory of Christianity.

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