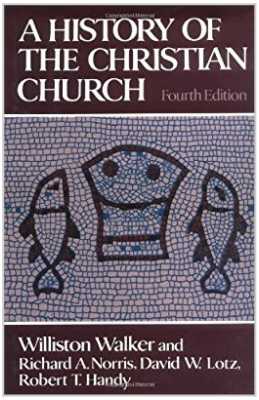

A History of the Christian Church

By Williston Walker, Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, Robert T. Handy

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover
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About the Author
Williston Walker was born in Portland, Maine, July 1, 1860, the son of a distinguished Congregational minister. He received his A. B. degree from Amherst College in 1883, was graduated from Hartford Theological Seminary in 1886 and received his Ph.D. degree from the University of Leipzig in 1888. He succeeded Woodrow Wilson as associate professor of history at Bryn Mawr College. He later taught church history at Hartford Theological Seminary. In 1901 Yale University called him to succeed George Park Fisher as Titus Street Professor of Ecclesiastical History, a position which he held until his death in 1922. *The Reformation, Ten New England Leaders, Great Men of the Christian Church,* and *A History of the Christian Church* are among his distinguished works.

Chapter 1

The General Situation

At the birth of christ, the lands which surrounded the Mediterranean Sea were under the political control of Rome, whose empire embraced not only the coastal territories but their hinterlands as well. Bounded by the ocean and by the Rhine and Danube rivers to the north of the Mediterranean, it encompassed North Africa and Egypt and stretched in the East to the borders of Armenia and of the Persian Empire.

In the century and a half before the appearance of Christianity, the sway of the Senate and People of Rome was extended from Italy to include not merely Gaul, Spain, and North Africa in the West, but also, in the East, the Hellenistic monarchies which had succeeded to the empire of Alexander the Great. This time of expansion coincided with an era of growing conflict and instability in the social and political life of the Roman republic. The assassination (44 B.C.) of Julius Caesar, carried out by a party which feared his subversion of traditional republican institutions, was followed by civil wars which affected all parts of the territories ruled by Rome. It was generally with relief and hope, therefore, that people greeted the final triumph of Octavian, Caesar's nephew and adopted son, whose task it became to reconstitute the Roman state and to reform the administration of its provinces. Preserving the form of republican institutions, Augustus (as Octavian was officially and reverently named in 27 B.C. by the Senate) eventually concentrated all effective power *(imperium)* in his own hands, receiving lifetime status as tribune of the people and then as consul, with the title "leading citizen" *(princeps).* Acting with this authority, he brought order to the government of the provinces and relative peace to the whole of the Mediterranean world.

The imperial system which Augustus thus established embraced peoples of many languages and cultures. In most regions of the empire, the basic political and social unit was -- or came to be -- the *polis*, a term commonly but inadequately translated into English as "city." This was a corporation of citizens tending the affairs of a modest territory whose heart was an urban center of greater or smaller size. Under Roman aegis, such civic corporations -- which were ruled oligarchically for the most part -- were responsible for their own

local affairs as well as for the taxes which supported the imperial establishment and its armies. Each city thus provided for the worship of the god or gods who were its patrons, for the administration of justice, and for the welfare of its citizens and other residents. Each was a focus of local pride, with its economic roots in the surrounding countryside.

Put together as it was out of a multitude of ethnic, cultural, and religious groupings, the empire was held together by a common political allegiance, by economic and commercial interdependence, and by a shared higher culture. Politically, everything depended upon Rome, its emperor, and its armies, both for the maintenance of internal order and for the protection of the outer frontiers of Mediterranean civilization, where most of the legions were stationed. Within the empire, the principal source of wealth was the land and its products, and agriculture was the chief industry. Communities distant from the Mediterranean and its tributary rivers lived for the most part on local produce, but the cities of the seacoast -- and especially great cosmopolitan centers like Rome -- were dependent on a lively trade in the staples of life: grain, wine, and olives. North African grain fed the population of Rome as, at a later period, Egyptian grain transported from the seaport of Alexandria sustained the inhabitants of Constantinople. Italy itself was a center of viniculture, and its wines were exported extensively. The Mediterranean cities, then, which were the core of the empire, were increasingly bound together in a nexus of commercial relationships.

The unity and cohesion of the empire, however, depended also upon the existence of a common higher culture -- the "Hellenistic" culture which grew up in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.), as Greek language, education, and civic institutions were diffused through the eastern Mediterranean world. Even Rome, in the century and a half before the birth of Christ, became a cultural and intellectual tributary of the Greek tradition. As Greek became the daily speech of city-dwellers in the East, it also became a normal second language for educated persons in the West, where Latin was the common tongue. Other languages -- Aramaic, Coptic, Punic -- by no means disappeared, but they tended more and more to become languages of the uneducated and of the rural population. In this way, Greek science, Greek religious philosophy, and Greek art and literature enriched and were enriched by other traditions and created the possibility of a shared world of cultural and religious values for the urban civilization of the Mediterranean area.

In this complex, variegated, and remarkably sophisticated world, religious concerns, beliefs, and practices were central in the lives both of individuals and of communities. At the same time, however, the religious currents of the time were diverse. To speak in general terms, one can distinguish three broad categories of religious belief and observance. First, there was the traditional religion of the family and community gods -- what one might call the "civic religion" of the Roman-Hellenistic world. Second, there were the so-called "mystery cults." These were for the most part oriental cults which had their mythic roots in local fertility rites, but which, in the cosmopolitan world of the Greek-speaking empire, underwent a transformation and became voluntary brotherhoods which offered their initiates salvation from the trammels of Fate and Fortune. Finally, there was the way of life which sought human fulfillment and blessedness through the pursuit and practice of philosophical wisdom: a wisdom founded upon criticism of the traditional gods of the Greek pantheon, but capable, as time went on, of offering a "demythologized" version of traditional religion. In practice, these different styles of religion coexisted peacefully, and some individuals were, to one degree or another, involved in all three of them. They responded, however, to different needs, and to some extent they presupposed differing perceptions of the human situation.

On one matter, however, the various types of religion were at one. People in the Roman world were acquiring -- had, indeed, for the most part already acquired -- a new picture of the cosmos. Gone was the flat earth and overarching heaven of ancient myth. Educated and half-educated persons alike now saw the earth as a sphere set motionless at the center of things. Around it in their orbits moved the seven planetary spheres,

and around this whole system moved "the heaven," the realm of the fixed stars. To the ancients, however, this cosmos was no mere machine. They perceived it rather as an ensouled -- that is, a living -- thing, in which orderly change and motion were maintained by divine Mind. The world was pervaded by life, and the gods who inhabited the heaven and the planetary spheres were the manifestations or representatives of the ultimate divine Power which extended to all things, even to affairs in that sector of the cosmos -- earth -- which was farthest removed from the divine realm.

Traditional religion in the Roman-Hellenistic world was a public and social affair, an affair of family and community. Since human well-being depended at every moment on the good will of the gods, the cosmic powers, religion sought their help for the common concerns of life: the growing of crops, the conduct of business, the difficult enterprises of war and diplomacy. Its rites were age-old and traditional, seldom rationalized, and conducted by the normal leaders of the community: the head of the family or the elected magistrates of the city. It used divination, dream, and oracle to seek the will of the powers; it used prayer and sacrifice to gain their alliance.

It is in the setting of such traditional religion that one must understand the phenomenon of emperor worship or worship of the state that grew up in the Roman Empire. The triumphs of Roman arms and the benefits which the imperial order conferred on the Mediterranean world convinced the Romans themselves, and most of their subject peoples too, that Roman power was a manifestation of the power of the gods -- that Rome had a divine mission. Augustus himself, conscious that the imperial city's destiny could only be fulfilled if she maintained her covenant with the gods, undertook a revival of traditional religion. Furthermore, just as he erected an altar to the goddess Peace in the Senate-House in Rome, so he followed earlier eastern precedent by encouraging a cult of the goddess Roma -- the divine power manifested in the conquering and ordering work of the Roman state. A similar outlook lay behind the establishment and growth of the cult of the divine emperor -- whose actual origins lay in the East and not in Rome itself. When first permitted in Italy, this cult took the relatively modest form of veneration of the "genius" of the emperor (that is, of the divine *alter ego* of the human ruler), or else of the "deification" of an emperor after death. Roman sensibilities did not originally permit the declaration that an ordinary human being was himself a god; only an acknowledged madman like Caligula (37-41 A.D.) could have taken such a step. In the provinces, however, and especially in the East, such restraint was less common. There, following age-old custom, worship was offered to the emperor in his own person as a living manifestation of the divine. This cult evoked no deep personal piety, widespread and carefully organized as it eventually was; it belonged to the realm of formal civic religion, and its role, as people generally recognized, was political. It did, however, represent a real conviction: that the basis of political order lay in the divine realm.

This traditional religion, however, was in many if not most cases irrelevant to personal needs and longings. Its rites, carefully maintained as they were, were impersonal, and its concern was with public order and public welfare. Hence the ordinary people of the cities turned to other religious cults to achieve personal security, prosperity, and a sense of having a place and a positive destiny in a confusing and impersonal world.

The cosmos as these folk experienced it was not a perfectly ordered and harmonious whole. The earth of their experience was far removed from the blessed realm of the gods. It was the realm of chance and necessity, and one in which demonic powers, whose territory was the lower region between Earth and Moon, worked their unpredictable will. Much popular religion, therefore, was concerned with understanding and control of the nonhuman powers which -- often capriciously, it seemed -- ruled human life. The practice of magic -- the use of charms, spells, and amulets -- was rife. There was also a great vogue of astrology, imported in Hellenistic times from Babylonia and diffused throughout the Mediterranean world. To consult the stars was to gain some insight into one's destiny. It was also to confess that one's destiny was in the hands

of alien forces.

It is this situation which makes the popularity of the mystery cults comprehensible. These, as we have seen, were oriental "nature religions" which, in Hellenistic times, were diffused through the Mediterranean world as religions of salvation. The most popular of them were the cults of the Great Mother, which originated in Asia Minor; of Isis and Serapis, which derived from Egypt; and of Mithras, which spread at a later time from Persia. Rome originally viewed such religions with suspicion. They involved enthusiastic, even orgiastic, rites which seemed inconsistent with public decorum and morality. Nevertheless, it was the Roman authorities themselves who, at a time of crisis in the wars against Carthage, had introduced the worship of the Great Mother (suitably cleansed of its excesses) within the sacred enclosure of the Roman gods (204 B.C.); and by 80 B.C., the cult of Isis was established in the vicinity of Rome, though it endured long governmental opposition. In time, these cults were accepted even in the West as a normal element in the religious life of populace and rulers alike.

What did they offer ? For one thing, they offered, in their rites of initiation and in worship, an experience of the Divine which touched and evoked deep emotions of awe, wonder, and gratitude. The initiates of these secret mysteries "saw" the god and entered into fellowship with a divine being who had reached out to care for them. At the same time, these cults offered the gift of a blessed immortality in fellowship with the gods. Rooted as they generally were in the myth of a dying and rising god, they provided an experience of rebirth to a new quality of life. The initiate, become a sharer in the life of the god, was raised above the earthly realm controlled by fate and chance and so was liberated for the immortality proper to those who enjoy fellowship with the Divine. The mystery cults, then, were religions of salvation which both drew and fed on a sense of the transcendent.

A third way which people could follow in their search for a fulfilled and happy life was the way of philosophical wisdom. In the Roman-Hellenistic era, "philosophy" was not the name of an academic discipline concerned with a special range of abstract questions. Rather, it denoted the quest for an understanding of the cosmos and of the place of humanity within it -- an understanding which was achieved only by participation in a certain way of life and which issued in happiness or beatitude. The philosopher's vocation, then, was not for everyone. It entailed a life of intellectual and moral discipline which only the few could pursue. On the other hand, the pictures of the world and of the human situation which philosophy evolved had a way of turning into commonplaces of popular religion and morality. In the end, philosophy provided the framework of understanding which made sense of the myths and rituals of religion.

The origin of the Roman-Hellenistic philosophical schools is found in the fourth century before Christ, in the movement of inquiry and speculation stimulated by the teaching of Socrates at Athens. This movement had its first great leader in Plato (d. 347 B.C.), whose ideas were communicated in popular form in his series of dialogues. The Academy which he founded -- and which was finally closed only in 529 by the Christian emperor Justinian -- was the first of the great "schools" of Hellenistic philosophy. Plato's pupil Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) broke away from the Academy after Plato's death and became the founder of the Peripatetic school, but the influence of Aristotle's teaching was most strongly felt in the Christian era, after the republication of his scientific and philosophical works in the first century B.C. Subsequently, there appeared the school of Epicurus (342-270 B.C.) and that of the Stoics, so named from the Porch *(stoa)*, a public hall in Athens where its founder, Zeno (d. ca. 264 B.C.), originally taught. Each of these schools became, in effect, a continuing brotherhood which expounded and developed its founder's teachings. The differences among them involved a wide range of issues: epistemology, cosmology, and theology as well as ethics. The focal problem which was debated in the Hellenistic age, however, was that of the nature of the "happy" or fulfilled human life.

The school of Epicurus taught that pleasure -- in the negative sense of absence of mental disturbance *(ataraxia)* -- was the highest human good. The good life is the life which maximizes pleasure by minimizing the pain attendant upon unnecessary desire and anxiety. Thus, paradoxically, the greatest pleasure is attained by a life of quiet, retirement, and restraint: a life characterized essentially by self-control. Epicurus and his followers regarded religion -- fear of the gods and anxiety about an afterlife -- as one of the principal sources of disturbance and pain. They believed, however, that all such religious fears were baseless. The gods exist, they taught, in an empyrean world of their own and have no responsibility for, or interest in, the affairs of human beings. Death, moreover, marks a mere end to human existence and is therefore not evil, since with death awareness of pleasure and pain disappears. This doctrine admirably fitted the Epicurean conviction that the cosmos is formed, as Democritus (d. ca. 380 B.C.) had earlier taught, by the fortuitous and ever-changing combination of eternally existing atoms within the Void. This philosophy enjoyed a brief vogue in the first century B.C. in aristocratic circles at Rome and its greatest literary product is the brilliant poem *De rerum natura* of the Roman Lucretius (d. 55 B.C.). In Christian times, Epicurus's doctrines were not influential or widespread, but they were often unfairly pilloried, by Christians and others, for polemical purposes.

Much more influential, especially in the Latin West, was the philosophy of the Stoics with their teaching that the sole human good is virtue or "the life according to nature." The doctrines of Zeno, expanded and developed by his successors Cleanthes (d. ca. 232 B.C.) and Chrysippus (d. ca. 207 B.C.), found notable western exponents in Lucius Annaeus Seneca (d. 65 A.D.), the former slave Epictetus (d. ca. 135 A.D.), and the emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.). Like the Epicureans, the Stoics were materialists. Roughly speaking, they conceived the cosmos to be composed out of two kinds of "stuff" or "substance": a passive matter, and the active, fiery "spirit" or "breath" *(pneuma)* which transfuses matter, forms it, and causes it to cohere. This *pneuma* functions in the cosmic body much as soul does in the human body; that is, it is the source of life and of harmony. Called "God" or "Fate" or "Reason" *(logos)*, this "spirit" is the indwelling divinity whose outflowing powers are the gods of popular religion. The human soul, itself rational, is a spark or portion of the divine Reason.

The good for human persons, then, consists in their being fully what they are -- that is, in living and acting according to their interior nature and identity, which is *logos.* Only such a life is the excellent (or, in other words, virtuous) human existence. What is more, only the virtuous life is free, for it alone is within people's power to achieve, and it alone lets people be truly themselves. Whatever depends, therefore, on external circumstance -- health, for example, or worldly success, or sensual pleasure -- is no essential part of the human good. In fact, dependence on external circumstance alienates the person from himself. It is a sickness of the soul which the Stoics called "passion" *(pathos)*, because the person who is subject to it is passive in relation to influences stemming from outside and to that degree unfree and unfulfilled. This outlook led the Stoics to the view that differences of rank and status are secondary. All persons are ultimately equal, fellow citizens with one another and with the gods in a cosmic city.

In the Hellenistic era, it was Epicurean and Stoic teachings which were most widespread. The future, however, was to belong to Platonism, which underwent a revival in the first century before Christ, though in a significantly altered form. The teaching of Plato was based ultimately on his distinction between that-which-is (Being) and that-which-comes-to-be (Becoming). Searching for the true basis of order in the moral, political, and natural realms, Plato discerned it in the system of Ideas or Forms -- the models or originals of empirical reality. These Forms were characterized by two essential qualities. First, they were seen simply to be, unchangeably, self-identically, and hence eternally. Second, they were seen to be *intelligible,* capable of being grasped by mind. In contrast to this realm of Being and Intelligibility, Plato saw the visible world of immediate experience as a realm of continual Becoming -- a world about which it was impossible to have stable knowledge because it was always slipping through one's mental fingers.

These two realms of Being and Becoming, however, were not in Plato's view divorced. The empirical world images and participates in the eternal world of Being. That it does so, moreover, is owing to the activity of living, self-moving soul, which is a denizen of both spheres. As soul contemplates and internalizes intelligible Being, conforming its own life to that truth, it orders and harmonizes the world of Becoming, so that the temporal order becomes "a moving image of eternity." The cosmic order is thus the product of the contemplation and action of the Soul of the World; the vocation of human beings, themselves rational souls, is to imitate that contemplation and action: to rise to knowledge of the Forms, of that-which-is, and in that knowledge to confer moral and political order on human affairs.

Plato's immediate successors in the Academy carried on his tradition of thought and the mathematical inquiries which had arisen out of his theory that the Ideas or Forms were archetypal "numbers." With Arcesilaus (315-241 B.C.), however, and Carneades (213-128 B.C.), the Academy took a new turn. Convinced that Socrates and Plato had never propounded a positive, "dogmatic" system but had always examined issues from all sides without reaching firm or final conclusions, these thinkers taught the doctrine of "suspension of judgment" *(epoche).* In this spirit, they mounted critical attacks on belief in the gods and on the dogmas of other philosophical schools (especially those of the Stoics), teaching that the wise man finds in probability, not certainty, the only "guide of life." This spirit of "Academic doubt" much impressed the Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C) and through him the young Augustine of Hippo.

In the end, however, skepticism did not reign in the Platonist Academy. In the first century before Christ -- and at roughly the same time as Aristotle's philosophical and scientific works were rediscovered and beginning to circulate -- a movement, generally known as "Middle Platonism," appeared which sought a return to the positive teachings of Plato, especially as those were set out in the dialogue *Timaeus.* It was typical of this movement, however, which in the course of the first and second Christian centuries rose to virtual dominance, that its understanding of Plato fused his ideas with themes drawn from Stoicism and, increasingly, from Aristotle.

Thus Middle Platonism took over from Aristotle the idea of formless matter as the ultimate substratum of all visible things, as well as the conception of a transcendent God understood as Mind *(nous).* This God had the Platonic Forms as the content of his thought and so was identified with Plato's realm of Being. The visible cosmos is shaped as the eternal World-Soul, formed and enlivened by its contemplation of God, in its turn confers form and harmony on formless matter. It follows from this account of things that the philosopher who seeks self-fulfillment by conforming his way of being with ultimate reality must take the cosmos and its order as the starting point of his search, for the cosmos is the image and reflection of eternal truth. In the end, however, he must transcend the visible world. He must rise in his thought to its original, the everlasting Good. There the multiplicity of the time-and-space world is harmonized in an ultimate unity, and there the rational soul finds its proper companion and the fully worthy object of its love. For the soul, too, is eternal and immortal, and its natural affinity is not for the passing world of time and space, but for Being. Thus the end of the philosophical quest is "likeness to God": a knowledge of God which amounts to a sharing in the divine way of being.

As has already been said, this philosophic quest was not for everyone. The philosopher's way to self-fulfillment involved not only long education and study, but also a moral discipline *(askesis)* designed to cleanse the soul of the passions which prevented it from being its true self. Yet the philosophical quest as it was understood in the era of the early empire had more than a little in common with the mood of popular religion, especially as the latter was expressed in the vogue of the mystery cults. Both sought a kind of salvation from the changes and chances of life on earth. Both envisaged this salvation as a liberation -- whether from the passions which bound people to the space-and-time world or from indifferent or hostile cosmic powers. Both, finally, saw the human person as capable of a transcendent destiny in the fellowship of

the Divine. It is no surprise, therefore, that a Platonist philosopher like Plutarch of Chaeronea (d. ca. 120 A.n.) should be able and willing to make philosophical sense of the myth of Isis and Osiris -- to see it as an allegory of humanity's situation and destiny. No more is it surprising that when another oriental religion of salvation -- Christianity -- began to make its way in the social and cultural milieu of the Hellenized cities of the Roman Empire, it should find sympathetic resonances in the philosophy and the religion of that era.

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