

CHRISTIANITY AND ROMAN SOCIETY

Early Christianity in the context of Roman society raises important questions for historians, sociologists of religion and theologians alike. This work explores the differing perspectives arising from a changing social and academic culture. Key issues on early Christianity are addressed, such as how early Christian accounts of pagans, Jews and heretics can be challenged and the degree to which Christian groups offered support to their members and to those in need. The work examines how non-Christians reacted to the spectacle of martyrdom and to Christian reverence for relics. Questions are also raised on why some Christians encouraged others to abandon wealth, status and gender-roles for extreme ascetic lifestyles and on whether Christian preachers trained in classical culture offered moral education to all or only to the social elite. The interdisciplinary and thematic approach offers the student of early Christianity a comprehensive treatment of its role and influence in Roman society.

GILLIAN CLARK is Professor of Ancient History at the University of Bristol. She has written extensively on Christianity and classical culture and her previous publications include *Augustine: Confessions Books I–IV* (editor) (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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JCJM

emerito non otioso

Ars mea, multorum es quos saecula prisca tulerunt:
sed nova te brevitatis asserit esse meam.

Omnia cum veterum sint explorata libellis,
multa loqui breviter sit novitatis opus.

Te relegat iuvenis, quem garrula pagina terret,
aut si quem paucis seria nosse iuvat;
te longinqua petens comitem sibi ferre viator
ne dubitet, parvo pondere multa vehens.

(Cassiodorus, *De orthographia* 146, quoting Phocas)

This book's the work of many, but it's short,
And that is new and shows it to be mine.
What's new is putting briefly all that work.
Long books scare students: this is one for them,
And anyone who likes some serious thoughts
Concisely said. Long-distance travellers
Will find its content well above its weight.

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Preface

This book draws on research, editorial work, and teaching at the universities of Liverpool and Bristol. It owes much to my first experience of Bristol teaching, shared with Neville Morley, in the academic year 2000/1. Our final-year seminar on 'Christianity and Roman society' included students for whom Christianity is an interesting aspect of the Roman empire and students for whom Christianity is a living faith. I am grateful to them all, for their intellectual curiosity, for the consideration they showed each other, and for making it clear that I had accepted too easily many things that need to be explained. The final draft benefited from another final-year seminar, in autumn 2003, shared this time with Richard Goodrich. The book attempts to outline some of the possible explanations for things that need to be explained, and to direct its readers to others. It is, of course, a snapshot of fast-moving scholarship, from one person's perspective, in a specific context of place and time. It is a book that could go on being written for years to come, as new information and new interpretations are published; but no doubt the series editors feel that it has gone on being written for quite long enough.

There is an immense range of published work, from different national and religious traditions, on the evidence for Roman, Jewish and Christian history and religion in the early centuries CE. I am a classical historian with a special interest in late antiquity, not a theologian or a New Testament specialist or a Judaist. As a member of the Church of England, I recognise how much diversity there is in even one Christian tradition. As a classicist I know Greek and Latin, but not Hebrew and Aramaic, Syriac and Coptic and Ethiopic, Georgian and Armenian and Old Slavonic, all of which are important for the history of Christianity in the world that was dominated by the Roman empire. I find the late fourth and early fifth centuries particularly interesting, because of the classically trained Christian bishops who tried to make their scriptures and their faith intelligible to anyone who would come to church and listen, and who used their skills of rhetoric and networking

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Preface

to help the poor. I do not have the expertise to take the story much further, but others are working on later Christian writings, on late antique Jewish texts, on the kingdoms that succeeded Rome in the early medieval West, and on the later history of Byzantium and its interactions with Islam. I have kept to Greek and Latin in the Roman empire and the first five centuries of Christianity, with much gratitude to those whose knowledge and understanding has helped to supply some of the gaps in my own. Debts to individuals are not forgotten, but really are too numerous to mention. I have consistently learned from co-editing, with Andrew Louth, the monograph series Oxford Early Christian Studies; from co-editing, with Mary Whitby and Mark Humphries, the late-antique series Translated Texts for Historians; from sharing in the Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity network started by Ralph Mathisen; and from reading the work of the doctoral students whose commitment in difficult times takes this subject forward. Peter Garnsey and Paul Cartledge, editors of Key Themes, showed impressive patience as bureaucratic demands disrupted the teaching and research of all British academics; they also made valuable comments on the final draft. I am responsible for the translations and for the remaining errors.

In writing this book, I have often remembered a student I taught twenty years ago, who had entered her religious order in Ireland before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1965). Appealed to on questions of doctrine or practice, she could usually find an answer; but sometimes she would gently shake her head and say 'It makes you wonder what can we have been thinking of.' We do, sometimes, make progress.

Bristol, Epiphany 2004