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## A Crisis of Identity

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In the first four centuries of the Christian era, the face of Christianity slowly changed as the church sought to create for itself an identity separate from its Jewish roots. The implications of this metamorphosis are profound. Should Christianity be concerned to rediscover its forgotten foundations?

**C**hristianity (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx>) started within what was a Jewish community. Jesus Christ was a Jew, His disciples were Jews, and so were the majority of His early followers. Today we find ourselves in a world where biblical scholars increasingly perceive the books that comprise the New Testament as being Jewish in origin and concepts.

As we commence a new century and millennium, perhaps it is a good time to be reminded in some detail that the true identity of Christianity rests on Jewish foundations and is not distinct from that of Judaism in the larger sense. Perhaps it is a good time to rediscover the Jewish foundations of the [Christian faith](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-pulpit-of-preconceived-ideas-1040.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-pulpit-of-preconceived-ideas-1040.aspx>).

How did Christian and Jew coexist in the Roman world? To the leaders of the Roman Empire in the first century, Christianity was no more than a sect of Judaism. Even when in predominantly “gentile” areas of the Roman world, the apostles continued to appeal to the Jewish communities—for example, in Corinth and Rome. For a period of time, Christianity enjoyed the same freedoms of worship that Rome had provided for the Jews.

Yet by the fifth century, observers could state that Christianity as it appeared at that time did not differ from the pagan world. The Manichees were part of the Roman world of that day and derived their beliefs from various eastern sources. One of their bishops, Faustus, contended with [Augustine](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-augustine/548.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-augustine/548.aspx>) of Hippo (St. Augustine) that the Christian church was nothing more than a schism from paganism. “In a schism,” Faustus maintained, “little or no change is made from the original; as, for instance, you, in your schism from the Gentiles, have brought with you the doctrine of a single principle, for you believe that all things are of God. The sacrifices you change into love-feasts, the idols into martyrs, to whom you pray as they do to their idols. You appease the shades of the departed with wine and food. You keep the same holidays as the Gentiles; for example, the calends and the solstices. In your way of living you have made no change. Plainly you are a mere schism; for the only difference from the original is that you meet separately” (St. Augustine, [Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/140620.htm) (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/140620.htm>), Book XX. Online posting 1999. New Advent Catholic Website. March 9, 2000.)

Faustus’ contention with Augustine was aimed at the manner in which Christians had established their own holy days and festivals on the same days as pagan festivals. The concept enabled the pagan peoples who populated the Roman Empire of that day to more easily accept the new state religion of Christianity with minimal changes to their existing way of life. For Augustine, the popular spectacle of the theatre or circus had been replaced by the spectacle of the church.

A disciple of Augustine, Quodvultdeus, remonstrated with his society to “divert their passion for spectacles, not give it up” (Sermo 3.2, “De Symbolo I: Corpus Christianorum,” *Series Latina*, LX, quoted by R.A. Markus in *The End of Ancient Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 118). For Augustine, the true “spectacle” was found in the New Jerusalem, the City of God. Yet that spectacle had appropriated both the festival dates and the pagan temples of the pagan society. Christianity had become *inculturated* within the pagan world.

*Inculturation* is defined as the acceptance by a society of something from outside of itself with the intention of transforming that society and producing a beneficial “new creation.” It differs from *assimilation*, which is what some believe took place between Christianity and the pagan world. Assimilation provides for the absorption of the characteristics of one culture by another, whereas inculturation creates an additional new culture out of the two.

## **ATHENS OR JERUSALEM**

Christianity began in first-century Judea—a Jewish society. It was based on the holy writings of the Jewish people but was intended by its founder to correct what was lacking in the Jewish world. It also incorporated teachings of universal application that had been overlooked by certain elements of the Jewish religious leaders of that day. The books of the New Testament show the way in which the Christian message was taken throughout the known world by the apostles and other evangelists. With the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the position of that city as the focus of the Christian church was lost. Thereafter, the focus moved to Asia Minor, where Papias, a historian of the second century, records that the apostle John, the last of the original apostles, lived out his final days.

Writing at the end of the second century, Tertullian from Carthage raised a question that has echoed down through [church history](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-first-christians/56309.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-first-christians/56309.aspx>): “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian was reacting to a change that was already taking place within the church, whereby the philosophical concepts of the Hellenistic world were replacing what he saw as biblical standards. This was occurring on two levels throughout the church, both in terms of its practices and of its underlying beliefs.

In his sermon entitled “On Idolatry” (Chapter XIV), Tertullian railed against those who claimed to be Christian yet participated in the pagan activities of the circus. This was especially so when it came to certain days such as the Saturnalia and the New Year, dates that equate to our December 25 and March 25 (the New Year of the Julian calendar). This he saw as contrary to the conduct required of true Christians. He assailed the reasoning whereby his fellow Christians sought to justify their actions by being “all things to all people,” and he then used the Scriptures to condemn their actions.

Clearly, Tertullian was not successful in preventing pagan ideas from infiltrating the church.

Neither had others before him been able to stand in the way of the far-reaching changes taking place within the church. The apostles had written of those who wished to corrupt the faith that had been delivered to them (2 Corinthians 11:13-15; 2 Peter 2; Jude 4).

In the middle of the second century, Polycarp, who had been a disciple of the apostle John, traveled to Rome from Ephesus in Asia Minor in order to seek unity concerning the date of the Passover. Polycarp kept the Passover according to the Jewish reckoning, whereas the church in Rome had established a new date and format for the event, which now focused on the resurrection (see *"The Pass Over to Easter"* (</visionmedia/passover-easter/1054.aspx>)).

During the reign of Constantine (A.D. 310-337), "something happened... which transformed both politics and religion in Europe.... Europe as a political entity was changed by it, but so was Christianity" (Alistair Kee, *Constantine versus Christ*, SCM Press, London, 1982, p. 1).

Christianity had come of age, becoming the religion of the empire. It had removed itself from its Jewish roots and had inculturated itself within the Roman world, creating something new in the process. It was not just a religion anymore. It had become politicized and was now an adjunct of the state.

So from the time of Constantine onward, Christianity was introduced to the masses of the Roman Empire. But it had to be made acceptable to them. The easiest way of doing that was to make the worship of Christianity comply with what was already customary to the people. A Christian calendar from the year 354 creates a sense of ambiguity in that it lists both Christian *and* pagan events. The sacred calendar of Roman society was closely related to its civic life, so to avoid disruption, the pagan days had to be cleansed of their existing religious meaning and be reinterpreted to reflect Christian meaning. To accomplish that end, the church literally commandeered the pagan calendar, and the pagan festivities gradually donned the mask of Christian festivals. By the time of Augustine at the end of the fourth century, these changes were well established.

## **CREATIVE TENSION**

The accepted view of the development of Christianity is that these historical events were merely a natural development—that Christianity infiltrated itself into the known world and conquered the political systems of the time in accordance with the instructions of its founder. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The traditional perception of the Jewish world within the Roman Empire was actually defined and established by later rabbinic interpolation. Religious identifiers such as circumcision, the Sabbath and Torah observance were then used by church historians to create artificial lines of demarcation between Judaism and early Christianity. Over the centuries, the church established an interpretation of various key passages of Scripture to prove that Christians were neither Torah observant, nor did they keep the Sabbath. Yet ironically, these same scriptures can be read and understood as showing Christians *complying* with these very religious identifiers.

Recent archaeological studies of Jewish findings in Italy have shown that these traditional identifiers were not always evident among the Diaspora, and that the concept of what it meant to be Jewish was more nuanced than has been generally accepted. The whole system of Jewish (and, by extension, early Christian) social interaction with the surrounding societies demands reexamination.

Writing on the archaeological evidence garnered from Italy, L. Michael White states: "What has become increasingly clear is that traditional assumptions of the static nature of Diaspora Judaism, whether in relation to the later development of the rabbinic tradition or in relation to the emergence of the Christian movement, must be discarded. Instead, we see a diverse and socially active Jewish life in the Diaspora, where the competing social and cultural pressures of self-definition and assimilation are held in a creative tension by local congregations" ("Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia," in *Judaism and Christianity in First Century Rome*, Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson, eds., Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998, p. 33).

## **CHANGING FOUNDATIONS**

So how did this inculturation arise?

The ground had already been well prepared. The second century witnessed Marcion's attempts to remove the church from its Hebraic foundation and reform it on a purely Hellenistic base. But Marcion was ahead of his time. He was denounced as a heretic and excommunicated from the church. His erroneous ideas, however, provided prolific seeds that were destined to germinate and produce much fruit. Within the next three centuries, the church would adopt these ideas of which he had dreamed. It is only within the past few decades that the continuing impact of Marcion upon the church has really been considered and evaluated.

Early in the third century, Origen in Alexandria, Egypt, started to syncretize the beliefs of the Church with those of the last pagan school of philosophy—Neoplatonism—as propounded by his fellow citizen Plotinus. Both men had in fact studied under the same teacher. Their ideas reached their fullness in the writings of Augustine almost two centuries later. Over this period, the church moved in important respects away from its biblical foundation as practiced by Jews and Christians in the first century; in particular, it discarded the biblical sense of time itself. The church accommodated itself to the world of the empire by adopting what in biblical thinking would have been described as an idolatrous pagan philosophical basis appealing to the appetites of the people of the empire.

A close reading of the New Testament reveals an altogether different scenario to that of this paganized church. Christianity generally flourished in the proximity of the synagogue. Its appeal was first to the Jews and then to those non-Jews, or gentiles, who had interactions with the Jews. The apostolic record of the New Testament is of small groups of people who were not seeking political influence in the world around them. The change they desired started among themselves and would culminate in the establishment of a future earthly kingdom by Jesus Christ at His return. This was the focus of so many of the [prophecies of the Old Testament](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-understanding-prophecy/73844.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-understanding-prophecy/73844.aspx>)—prophecies that are still waiting to be fulfilled after almost 2,000 years of Christianity.

The pagan world perceived Christianity as being a destructive force. Luke’s account of the confrontation of Paul with Demetrius at Ephesus shows a world far removed from that of Augustine and the fourth century (Acts 19:23-41). Demetrius saw the concepts taught by Paul as representing a force that would demolish, destroy and replace the pagan practices of his city rather than engulf and absorb them. Christian teaching would turn the existing world upside down rather than amalgamate with it.

Paul was arrested in Jerusalem after his second evangelical journey in Asia Minor and Greece, and arraigned in Caesarea before Felix, who was king of the Jews. Paul had been preaching to both Jews and gentiles, yet he was nonetheless seen by his accusers in Jerusalem as leader of a Jewish sect: he was accused of being a ringleader of the Nazarenes (Acts 24:5). In this passage, the English word *sect* is translated from the Greek word *hairesis*, which is the same term that Josephus used to describe the principal religious groups that existed within first-century Judaism. Thus, the accusation against Paul was that he was a

ringleader of a group perceived to be within the *Judaic religious framework* of that day. His accuser used the term in a polemical manner, but Felix would have been aware of the term and its meaning.

Interestingly, a group known as the Nazarenes can be traced throughout the history of the Roman world until the end of the fourth century. The known beliefs and practices of this group correlate well with the actions and standards of Christian groups described in the New Testament. Both the Jewish and the larger Christian communities saw them as heretical (Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1988).

Yet by the time of Augustine, Christianity had acquired both the outer dress and the inner soul, in terms of its spiritual approach, that had once adorned and characterized the pagan world. Its removal from its first-century Jewish roots was complete.

## **LOST IDENTITY**

Now, some 15 centuries later, the secularized Western world considers Christianity largely irrelevant. Small wonder. Attempts to create a sense of widespread religious fervor and expectation surrounding the third millennium's arrival have not succeeded to any great extent. Western society has largely returned to its godless circuses, theatres and other entertainments.

All of these verifiable facts would seem to confront us with crucial, far-reaching questions. Has Christianity in important respects been prevented from conveying the teachings of its master? Did it lose its way in those early centuries, eschewing the identity it had been given in a quest for a seemingly grander role? What would have been the outcome for Christianity had it continued as a corrective of the Judaism of the day? Might it have become *the ideal manifestation of the people of God*, which Israel had been challenged to become from the inception of the nation-state at Mount Sinai?

With many perceiving that Christianity has failed, these questions give us pause for thought.