

The Last Stand of Polytheism:
The Altar of Victory

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By the late fourth century the Roman Empire teetered on the brink of potentially the largest paradigm shift in its history since the demise of the Republic and the ascension of Augustus to the status of Emperor. From a seemingly humble beginning four hundred years prior, Christianity had rapidly adapted itself away from existing as a refuge for the poor and miserly and began to permeate all levels of Roman society, including the senatorial aristocracy and the emperor himself. Simultaneously, a resurgence of polytheistic art and literature coupled with an abundance of powerful polytheistic political figures made ready a final conflict between Christianity and paganism. The setting of this showdown was the controversy over the Altar of Victory in the Roman Senate House, and to the victor would go the Empire.

During the third century Rome began its decline. Assassinations, usurpers, and military *coup d'états* were common. Stability was fleeting. Christians were often used as imperial scapegoats, and persecutions against Christians were carried out under Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian. Decius required all citizens to acquire *libelli*; certificates clearly stating they had offered sacrifice, an activity explicitly forbidden by Christianity. Valerian stripped Christian senators of their rank, clearly indicating that Christianity had already begun to penetrate into the highest levels of the aristocracy.

Political stability was regained by Diocletian's tetrachy system, although the inherently competitive nature between the four heads of state lead to periods of calm punctuated by profound chaos at the death of a tetrarch. Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 ended imperial persecution of Christians

and Constantine's own conversion after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge gave imperial favor to Christianity. However, the inertia of polytheism in the Roman Empire meant that a rapid, widespread conversion to Christianity would be impossible. Indeed, Constantine's own newly founded capital of Constantinople itself contained pagan temples. But the prominence lent to Christianity by Constantine's conversion undoubtedly accelerated the pace at which Christianity was spreading and, furthermore, heightened already taut tensions between Christians and polytheists.

During this time, and partly in response to the rapid ascension of Christianity, a revival of classical Roman polytheism was occurring. In 362 Emperor Julian the Apostate issued a decree banning Christians from holding teaching positions in classical schools. Under Julian, eastern oriental cults flourished, and polytheism regained some, though not all, of its previous status. Polytheistic politicians rose in power; Symmachus became the prefect of the city of Rome and Praetextatus a Consul. The invetion of the *codex* promulgated a renaissance of classical literature.

Spurred on by Julian's decree, polytheists categorized classical literature as decidedly unChristian, even though most Christians had for centuries accepted classical learning as a necessary component of Christian education. Polytheistic leaders were distancing Christians from traditional virtues in an attempt to condemn the Christians as non-Roman. The net effect was to radicalize some Christians away from classical texts. Fortunately for their sake, they chose not to follow Tertullian's perogative of "what has Athens

to do with Jerusalem,” but rather to rework classical texts into Christian ones. Two father and son Apollinarii wrote extensive Christian works in the style of classical authors. Numerous *centos* were written rearranging classical authors’ own words to extrapolate Christian themes. The disquietude originating from the conflict between Christians and polytheists would soon be brought to a head over the Altar of Victory.

The Altar of Victory was originally installed in the Roman Senate House by Augustus in honor of his victory over Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium. The altar was removed by Constantius in 356 to be then restored under Julian before again being removed by Gratian. The altar was a place at which senatorial oaths were taken and sacrifices offered. The altar itself was not deserving of the controversy that was to surround it. It was, however, a symbol of the traditional polytheistic religious practices of the Roman Empire and, as such, had great significance tied to it.

Symmachus, then prefect, had led some Senators in 382 to request Gratian to reinstate the altar. This attempt was countered by Christian senators who also wrote to Gratian, resulting in a stalemate and no action taken. Gratian further distanced himself from polytheism by withholding the endowments for the Vestal Virgins and becoming the first emperor to denounce the title of *Pontifex Maximus*.

Following Gratian’s death in 383 and the ascension of Gratian’s younger brother Valentinian II to the throne, Symmachus again wrote, this time to Valentinian, asking for the restoration of the Altar of Victory. This letter is

preserved in Symmachus' *Relatio*. Additionally St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, upon hearing of Symmachus' request of Valentinian, wrote a letter of his own imploring the young emperor to adhere to the Christian precedent set by his father and brother. The dynamic interplay between these two talented rhetoricians (Augustine at this time was a protégé of Symmachus) reveals the relationship between Christianity and polytheism during these critical years and their struggle to win imperial favor.

Ambrose appeals to Valentinian's duties as a Christian by suggesting that "a Christian forced to attend the senate with this choice would think he was being persecuted."¹ Ambrose also threatens Valentinian politically by suggesting that if Valentinian restored the altar "we bishops cannot take it quietly or conceal our resentment."² Finally, Ambrose threatens Valentinian religiously by commanding him to "act in the manner [he] realizes is conducive to [his] salvation before God."³ These threats reveal the gravity of the blow Ambrose feels would befall Christianity if the altar were to be restored.

Symmachus' approach to winning Valentinian's support is markedly different. In place of religious threats, Symmachus relies on established Roman Values by stressing the "defense of our ancestral practices and the rights and destiny of our fatherland."⁴ He places value on traditional pagan practices as

¹Ambrose, *Epistula XVII*, section 9, trans. Croke and Harries, *Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Rome*.

²*Ibid*, section 13.

³*Ibid*, section 17.

⁴Symmachus, *Relatio*, section 2, trans. Croke and Harries, *Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Rome*.

having safeguarded Rome in turbulent times by telling Valentinian to “follow in the footsteps of our fathers ... with such good fortune.”⁵ In this vein, he suggests that the current trend towards Christianity was the cause of a widespread famine of the time. This argument would resurface during the debates over the cause of the sack of Rome in 410.

Most importantly of all, Symmachus raises the issue that “the most effective method of inspiring fear of doing wrong is ... the presence of divine power.”⁶ For centuries Roman emperors had relied upon apotheosis to ensure their absolute power. A cult of the emperor had existed since the times of Augustus, and by admitting their fallibility, Christian emperors necessarily would need to forego deification. For this reason, Valentinian had a vested interest in maintaining polytheism in public places, such as the Altar of Victory, as a method of guaranteeing allegiance; an allegiance which seemed especially questioned by certain members of the Roman Senate.

In addition to the powerful rhetoric given by Symmachus and Ambrose, Prudentius wrote poetry in response to Symmachus’ plea to regain the altar. Prudentius implies Symmachus “breathes impiety” and “clings to his errors.”⁷ He further continues to condemn pagan rights as they have “entangled and defiled the imperial abode of supreme power.”⁸

The argument over the altar of victory was transpiring at precisely the

⁵*Ibid*, section 8.

⁶*Ibid*, section 5.

⁷Prudentius, *A Reply to Address of Symmachus*, 349.

⁸*Ibid*, 381.

moment that Christianity had gained prominent status and polytheism had experienced an uncharacteristic resurgence. This was the critical time upon which the religious course of the Roman Empire would be decided on. The fate of the Western world hung in the balance.

In the end, perhaps unsurprisingly, Valentinian chose to uphold the precedent set by his forebears and refused to restore the Altar of Victory to the Senate House. While undoubtedly the reaction of Romans at the time was subdued, the importance of this event as a signpost of the direction upon which Roman religion had been set cannot be overemphasized. Over the next century, Rome would be transformed into a wholly Christian state replete with monasteries and cathedrals. The Western half of the empire would not remain as a cohesive whole due to fractionalization and invasion and would soon dissolve to be supplanted entirely by the Roman Church.

With all fear of persecution removed, the Roman aristocracy rapidly converted to Christianity. R. A. Markus concluded similarly that the Roman aristocracy was christianized “without ... involving a break with their secular traditions.”⁹ Continuity between the old political system was maintained, and the power of established senatorial and aristocratic families was upheld.

Paganism gradually diminished in importance, although pagan practices were in large part either adopted by the Roman Catholic Church or remained simply as social rituals devoid of religious meaning. Indeed, “paganism” itself

⁹R. A. Markus, *Paganism, Christianity and the Latin Classics in the Fourth Century*, 13.

became defined in terms of the non-Christian; without Christianity there had been no concept of what constituted a “pagan.” Pagan rites and mythology became an undercurrent in mainstream Western thought, arising in children’s fairy tales and modern neopaganism.

The controversy surrounding the Altar of Victory is a testament to the deep chasms and rifts running through Roman society in the late fourth century. The net result being the ascension of Christian as the official state religion of the Roman Empire, and the abandonment of traditional Roman sacrifices and rituals.