

If there were ever a time similar to the Roman Empire at the birth of the Christian era - the first time a faith could travel nearly everywhere in a short time - we have nearly identical conditions now with our massively interlinked global communications networks. In our current scenario, the Mediterranean becomes the globe as we face a scenario similar to the the plight of the early pre-Christians. They had all the Greek religions and the Roman religions and some Egyptian cults on the side. Those disliking the devotional ceremonies of the Mithraic mysteries often found doctrinaire Stoics a bit too Zen. Intellectuals rarely believed in Zeus, but criticized the Epicureans as “be here now” utopians of doubtful patriotism. To many Greeks, Judaism was appealing, but ritual circumcision was appalling. Still, many were attracted to its monotheism and sense of social justice. The messianic promise of Christianity, combined with the full richness of its monotheistic Jewish roots, was different and exciting.

Once Saint Paul pioneered baptism without circumcision, a crucial turning point in the faith, the Christian message spread rapidly around the Mediterranean from one Greek community to the next. Every book in the New Testament was written in Greek, the common scientific and philosophical language of the Roman Empire. In the first century, going Greek was going digital and the literati could read it anywhere. Ironically, Jesus, an Aramaic speaker familiar with Hebrew, could not have read his own Gospel except in translation. His message was far more relevant to a people he had never known than to his own Jewish co-religionists. The time was right, society was ripe for a change; and in less than a hundred years it had spread everywhere Latin or Greek was spoken. In three hundred years Christianity had become the religion of the Western world.

The world currently presents us with more than a dozen major world faiths, each with scores of legitimate variations, not to mention philosophical schools, cultural traditions, and regional cults led by local charismatics of every sort. There is no end to the choices available these days, from the God of Abraham to the Gods of Zoroaster. There is one vast difference, however, and it is in the power which organized religion actually holds in modern secular society. One of the more useful results of the intercultural blending among the nations of the world is an agreement on rule by law rather than by dictate. Since human law is traditionally

enforced by secular authority, by the twentieth century traditional values were increasingly promoted by civil, rather than religious agencies, from international coalitions to confront disease and famine to local volunteer groups from Doctors Without Borders to the Girl Scouts.

Ironically, the most brutal behavior seems to originate with those promoting fundamentalist religious belief. The last twenty-five years have been, in this respect, rather grim. In that time we have watched Iraqi Sunnis kill Iraqi Shia, Israeli Jews bomb Palestinian Muslims, Rwandan Hutus slaughtering Rwandan Tutsis, Bangladeshi Muslims hacking Bangladeshi bloggers, Palestinian teens attacking Jewish shoppers, Buddhist Sri Lankans killing Hindu Tamils, and mad-dog Islamist ISIS fanatics murdering thousands in dozens of horrifying ways. Meanwhile, Christian Americans fight a war they execute by remote control, drone-targeting Afghani Wahabis, Yemeni radicals, and Syrian jihadis. Does anyone actually believe God, Allah, or Jehovah is behind all this? Not bloody likely, but try to convince a fundamentalist of any major faith that the heretical unbeliever may also go to heaven, and some holy quote will be produced proving otherwise. There is only so much flexibility available if one must ultimately rely on religious dogma.