

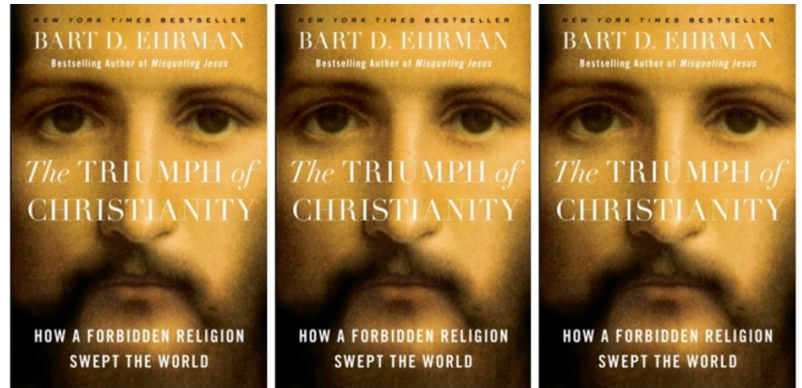


Written by [Laurence M. Vance](#) on June 18, 2018

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The Triumph of Christianity

***The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World*, by Bart D. Ehrman, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018, xiv + 335 pages, hardcover.**



Although the majority of Americans may not attend church weekly, and the share of adults who describe themselves as Christians is in decline, most Americans still identify with some form of Christianity. Certainly most conservatives and Republicans consider themselves to be Christians. According to a new analysis by the Pew Research Center, 91 percent of the members of Congress describe themselves as Christians, including all but two Republicans. At 80 percent, even Democrats in Congress also are overwhelmingly Christian.

This is remarkable considering that Jesus Christ began His ministry with a group of 12 disciples almost 2,000 years ago in the midst of the polytheism and paganism of the Roman Empire. “The ancient triumph of Christianity proved to be the single greatest cultural transformation our world has ever seen,” says Bart D. Ehrman in his new book *The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World*. “Without it the entire history of Late Antiquity would not have happened as it did.”

Ehrman is the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is a leading authority on the New Testament and the history of early Christianity, who has written or edited more than 30 books (including *New York Times* bestsellers), appeared on numerous television programs (including the History channel), and been featured in major newspapers and magazines.

Although Ehrman once claimed to be an evangelical Christian, and is a graduate of the evangelical Wheaton College in Illinois, he now says that he is “not a Christian” and has “no interest in promoting a Christian cause or a Christian agenda.” He now considers himself to be “an agnostic with atheist leanings” whose “life and views of the world would be approximately the same whether or not Jesus existed” (above quotations from Ehrman’s book *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, 2012). He does not view the “Christianization” of the Roman Empire as either “a victory for the human race and a sign of cultural progress on the one hand, or a major sociopolitical setback and cultural disaster on the other.” As an orthodox conservative Christian, I disagree with much of what Ehrman has written in his other books on Jesus, the New Testament, and Early Christianity. However, Ehrman’s agnosticism and ambivalence are actually a plus when it comes to *The Triumph of Christianity*, just as in the case of his aforementioned book on the existence of Jesus. He approaches his subject as an unbiased, objective historian who cannot be charged with writing from a pro-Christian agenda.



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The idea for the book struck Ehrman 20 years ago during his first trip to Athens. As he explored the archaeological wonders of the city, he stopped at the Areopagus, or Mars Hill. There he visited the spot where the Apostle Paul, on his second missionary journey, came “to preach about Jesus and his resurrection.” While standing on the site, he thought about “Paul, his sermon, and his surroundings.” Then the realization struck him that “in the end, Paul won.” What Paul preached on the Areopagus “eventually triumphed over everything” in the Agora and on the Acropolis, including “both the Temple of Hephaestus and the Parthenon.” “Christianity eventually took over Western Civilization.”

The *Triumph of Christianity* contains nine chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by an afterword. The book is enhanced by a timeline of relevant historical events from the reign of Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor, to the writing of *The City of God* by Augustine; an appendix on the rate of Christian growth; endnotes; and an index.

Ehrman begins (chapter 1) and ends (chapters 8 & 9) with Constantine, the Roman emperor who “converted” to Christianity in 312. Constantine did not make Christianity the Roman empire’s official religion, although within 80 years “Rome would become predominantly and officially Christian.” What happened instead was that “the imperial apparatus that before then had been officially opposed to Christianity and worked hard, in some regions of the empire, to extirpate it completely suddenly came to support it, promoting Christianity instead of persecuting it.”

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Constantine presided over Christianity going from “a persecuted faith to being the religion of most-favored status.” He provided the clergy with “funds out of the imperial treasury for use in their congregations” and “arranged for the building of major churches throughout his empire.” His agreement with his co-emperor Licinius led to the so-called Edict of Milan, which “gave complete freedom of religious expression to all inhabitants of the empire.” With but one exception, “every remaining Roman emperor was Christian,” although “some of Constantine’s successors did not share his commitment to tolerance.” After the death of Constantine, pagan sacrifices were outlawed and temples were ordered closed, but as Ehrman points out, “These laws were directed to specific locales, not empire-wide, and there existed no state apparatus to ensure they were carried out” — not until Emperor Theodosius I, who reigned from 379 to 395, made Christianity the official state religion. Under Theodosius, “violence against pagan sacred places and objects became increasingly pronounced” as “Christian leaders appeared with political power at their disposal and the will to use it in order to impose their religious preferences on others.” After Theodosius, about half the empire claimed to be Christian, and Christianity became “the greatest and most powerful institution Western Civilization has ever seen.”

In between the chapters on Constantine, Ehrman chronicles the spread of Christianity during its first four centuries. He believes that “the ultimate triumph of Christianity did not require the conversion of the emperor Constantine” because “if Christianity had simply continued to grow at the rate it was growing at the [time] of the emperor’s conversion — or even less — it still would have eventually taken over.”

In chapter 2, “Back to the Beginning: The Conversion and Mission of Paul,” Ehrman recounts the biblical story of who he considers to be “the most significant Christian convert of all time”: the Apostle



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Paul.

In chapter 3, “The Religious World of Conversion: Roman Paganism,” Ehrman discusses religion in the Roman empire. Religion was “virtually omnipresent,” and “the religious and sociopolitical realms were not kept distinct.” Roman religions were all polytheistic, with “gods for every municipality and every family,” although some pagans were henotheists who acknowledged “one ultimate divinity” above the mass of divine beings. Instead of established doctrines, ethical requirements, and detailed rules to follow, “there was instead an enormously varied set of ritual practices, each one formed by many years of custom and tradition.” The ubiquitous temples were not for worship, but to house the cult statue representing the temple god. The Roman state was tolerant of almost any religion as long as its practices were not “deemed socially dangerous.” This eventually led to the persecution of Christians, who were “often accused of being atheists” because they refused to acknowledge any god beyond the one they worshipped and rejected the traditional modes of honoring the gods that were thought to bring health and prosperity to the community. This is probably the most fascinating and informative chapter in the book.

In chapter 4, “Reasons for the Christian Success,” Ehrman explores the reasons for the triumph of Christianity over paganism. Many pagans were drawn to “the idea of one ultimate divinity” who was to be worshipped to “the complete exclusion of all other gods.” Christianity, unlike Judaism and paganism, was a missionary religion that sought converts, “not by public preaching or door-to-door canvassing of strangers” but by “their everyday social networks.” The “combination of evangelism and exclusion proved to be decisive for the triumph of Christianity.” Ehrman also adds that “one other feature of Christianity that made it different from all the pagan religions throughout the empire is that it encompassed numerous aspects of life that had always been kept distinct.” Christianity also had an “ethical code” that was lacking in paganism.

In chapter 5, “Miraculous Incentives for Conversion,” Ehrman explains what factors persuaded pagans to become Christians: stories of Jesus, his apostles, and their successors that verified the Christian message; the teaching of an afterlife in a “utopian existence” or an “everlasting hell,” neither of which most pagans subscribed to; and Christian endurance in the face of martyrdom.

In chapter 6, “The Growth of the Church,” Ehrman looks at the sources and nature of the data on the growth of the church. Here, and in the related appendix, he interacts with Rodney Stark’s popular book *The Rise of Christianity* (1996).

In chapter 7, “Christians Under Assault: Persecution, Martyrdom, and Self-Defense,” Ehrman relates the extent of local and empire-wide Christian persecution, especially under the emperors Valerian and Diocletian. He emphasizes that “not revering the city or state gods meant not being faithful to the city or state.”

The *Triumph of Christianity* is an important work that is masterfully written. Although I highly recommend the book to the Christian and non-Christian, to the religious and the non-religious, and to the atheist and the theist, I think it especially essential reading for Christians, most of whom are ignorant of the early history of their faith.



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