

U. The Rise of Christianity

1. Jesus Christ, the central figure of the religion of Christianity, lived during the “Age of Augustus” and the reign of Tiberius from c.4 BC to approximately 30 - 36 AD in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, in an area known today as Israel.
2. After his death, Jesus's students spread to different parts of the empire to pass on his religious teachings. This group of followers of Jesus are known as “apostles.”
3. Jesus's students passed on what they had learned to others, who themselves taught others, in a long chain of instruction by “word-of-mouth” over generations. As naturally happens when stories are told this way by different people, the stories changed. Although many of the stories and lessons of Christianity were basically told in the same way, others were not, and serious disagreements even arose.
4. One disagreement was over the story of Jesus himself. Followers of a Christian priest named Arius believed that Jesus was a man who had been a great teacher of Christianity sent by God, but still a man. Others, however, believed that Jesus was more than a man. They believed he was the son of God, and therefore godly, and even (in some miraculous way) God himself.
5. When the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity he was disturbed by the disagreements between Christian leaders and he wished to establish a standard version of Christianity. Constantine called a council of bishops from throughout the Empire at Nicaea to debate their views, including their views of Jesus. The Council of Nicaea decided that Jesus was Godly. This became known as the *Nicene Creed*. The council also denounced the views of Arius.
6. Because of the Council of Nicaea, the Nicene Creed became the standard form of Christianity in the Roman Empire, which is known as Roman Catholic Christianity.
7. The followers of Arius, called “Arians,” fled the Empire, and proceeded to teach the Germanic barbarians outside the Empire their version of Christianity. This created a separate kind of Christianity called Arian Christianity.
8. Although the Germanic Arians (such as the Visigoths and Lombards) later conquered the Romans, Arian Christianity did not triumph over Roman Catholic Christianity. Catholic Christianity had strengths which Arianism did not, among which was a bureaucratic tradition in Rome itself.
9. The bishop of Rome was supported by other bishops as the leader of an organized church, because, according to Catholics, Jesus has chosen one of his followers named Peter to spread Christianity in Rome, and his successors were viewed as the rightful leaders of the religion. (Not all Christians accept this view, but it is the Catholic view.)
10. The bishop of Rome thus gradually came to be thought of as the “papa,” or father or Christianity. This is where the English word “pope” comes from.
11. Having a single recognized leader was an advantage for Roman Catholic Christianity over Arian Christianity, because it allowed the Catholics to organize their religion according to single set of ideas and follow a coordinated plan decided by a single leader. The Arians had no such single leader or organization to direct them.

12. While the Roman emperors remained in power, however, it was the Christian emperors who played the most important role in shaping and promoting Christianity.
13. After Constantine, the next most important of these was Theodosius, who c.380 AD issued the *Edict of Thessalonica* that announced that Catholic Christianity was not merely a legally protected religion, but the official religion of the Roman Empire.
14. As the Roman empire crumbled, however, it was the popes who became the leaders, not merely as bishops of Rome, but as charismatic leaders in a desperate time. When Attila the Hun invade Italy, the Roman Emperor Honorius hid in a fortress, and did nothing to stop the attack. It was Pope Leo “the Great” who went to meet Attila and convinced him not to attack Rome.
15. There are different versions of the story of how Leo stopped Attila. Some say he convinced Attila that God would punish him for attacking Rome. Others say he merely bribed Attila. In the end, it doesn't really matter *how* he convinced Attila. What made him a famous leader was *that* he did it.
16. Although there were a number of able popes such as Leo in early Christianity, this still does not explain how Catholic Christianity was able to overcome Arian Christianity. To fully understand how this happened, we need to learn about one more part of the story of early Europe...