

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 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 by “word-of-mouth” and this led to many disagreements over time.
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.
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 view. 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 their beliefs, which became 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. One reason is the Catholic Christianity was more bureaucratic.
9. The bishop of Rome was supported by other bishops as the leader of an organized church. He was called the “papa,” or father of Christianity. This is where the English word “pope” comes from.
10. Having a single recognized leader was an advantage for Roman Catholic Christianity over Arian Christianity, because it allowed the Catholics to organize their religion while the Arians had no single leader.
11. After Constantine, the next most important Christian Emperor was Theodosius, who c.380 AD issued the *Edit of Thessalonica* that announced that Catholic Christianity was not merely a legally protected religion, but the official religion of the Roman Empire.
12. As the Roman empire crumbled, however, it was the popes who became the leaders, not merely as bishops of Rome, but as charismatic leaders. 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.
13. 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...