

The Romans always placed a great deal of importance on religion. Religion was a central part of life in the Republic, and remained so, although in a different way, in the empire. Livy and his predecessors credit the earliest Roman king, Romulus, with dedicating a temple to Jupiter on the spot of his victory over the Sabines. This begins a trend of victorious generals dedicating temples. But it is especially the second king of Rome, Numa Pompilius, who is credited with fully integrating religion into the Roman state, supposedly to give the Romans another outlet for all their energy besides constant warfare.

But perhaps the biggest example of how religion would come to be used occurs under the Tarquin kings, when the gigantic temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus was built on the Capitoline Hill. Such a building in the late sixth century was a clear way of advertising Rome's strength and importance to traders coming up the Tiber River.

Certain religious rites were associated with the kings. Once the kings are expelled, a rex sacrorum is appointed and given house at public expense in the Roman forum itself, the regia. This building, with its odd shape, was on a site in continuous use through much of Rome's history, as excavations by Darby Scott have shown. religious custom becomes a way of distinguishing different classes in Rome. During the conflict of orders one important aspect was the taking of auspices. Livy tells us that only patricians were given this rite and that this was a reason why plebeians were not allowed to hold offices such as the consulship. As with virtually everything about the Struggle of the Orders, right down to its very occurrence, it is unclear what was happening here. Linderski would argue that the auspices were at the center of the conflict, and that the eventual compromise was that one consul had to be patrician, but the literary evidence for this is far from clear. Certainly for at least one office, that of interrex, patrician status was a must, and this may have been due to auspices.

So religion was one way of defining political power. It is also a way of advertising. It has already been mentioned that Romulus supposedly dedicated a temple for victory in battle. For triumphant generals during the Republic one way of advertising a victory, and the family that achieved it, was with a manubial temple, a temple built by the general with the spoils of his victory. These were most conspicuously placed along the triumphal route. The earliest may be a pair of fourth century temples found near San Omobono, but the practice was clearly quite common as evidenced by the number of other temples whose remains can be seen there even today. Even in the triumph itself there was a strong religious aspect, for the triumphant general was allowed to wear the same dress as the cult statue of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.

Religion could also be abused for political purposes, as was shown in the declining years of the Republic. During the year 59 BC, the consul Bibulus, in an attempt to block Caesar's legislation, declared that he was "watching the heavens for omens." Caesar of course paid him no mind, but it cast a

shadow over the legality of his legislation, and even today scholars are not sure how valid it was. Caesar knew how to exploit religion himself, building a large temple to Venus, whom he also claimed for an ancestor, in his forum to commemorate his victories in the Civil Wars.

But it was Caesar's heir who really knew how to take advantage of religion. The deification of Caesar allowed Octavian to use the title *Divi Filius*, and to take advantage of the temple built to Julius Caesar in the forum. In his struggle for Antony a key aspect of Octavian's strategy was propaganda in the arts. This has been studied extensively by Zanker, and it is clear that Octavian used religious imagery to differentiate himself from Antony. Octavian became Apollo, a god of reason, while Antony was Dionysus, an eastern god whose cult had been driven out of Rome by Cato the Censor himself.

Once Octavian had supreme power and became Augustus – the appellation itself had religious connotations – he undertook to do an extensive overhaul and reorganization of Roman religion. The traditional view of this, espoused by Ward Fowler especially, is that in doing so he revived and renewed the old Republican practices that had fallen into disuse and gave them new life as part of his new regime. Of course, as North among others has pointed out, claiming to be restoring old religious customs is a common statement for some trying to consolidate power to make.

A new aspect of religion, at least from the Roman point of view, was the emperor cult. Caesar had been deified, it was true. But when Augustus achieved supreme power over the Roman world, it included many Hellenistic states whose inhabitants were used to worshipping their rulers as gods. So, by deification Augustus and his successors were easing the transition for the Greeks from old to new.

The pagan religion thrived during the empire. One advantage of the polytheistic Roman religion was its ability to expand to add other cults throughout the world. Many of these cults brought features missing from traditional religion. An important example is the cult of Mithras, an eastern deity connected to Ahura-Mazda. Initiates into this cult were guaranteed an afterlife.

Another far more important cult that began to make its presence felt was that of the Christians. Christians were different from other mystery cults in that they welcomed virtually anybody, including the lower classes and in that they rejected much of Roman society, including any validity for the traditional religions. This made them something of a threat, since the traditional religion and emperor cult were tightly bound up in the state, and the Christians faced persecution from the time of Nero on. The emperor Trajan eventually established a "don't ask, don't tell" policy to deal with it. So Christianity slowly grew during the imperial centuries, developing a strong hierarchy and its own literature as apologists like Tertullian rose up.

In the third century especially, the period which Rostovszeff termed the “military anarchy” the old gods began to lose some of their potency. At least one emperor during this time, Aurelian, minted coins with “Sol Invictus”, the unconquered sun, instead of a traditional god. But Diocletian in particular took pains to restore the old religious customs, take the title Jovianus for himself. He also initiated the last great persecution of the Christians.

It was Constantine I who reversed everything though. He too had issued coins to Sol Invictus, but at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 he underwent some sort of intense religious experience (we may safely discount the cross in the sky, as Norwich does) and began showing particular favor to the Christians. As Peter Brown shows, it was a gradual conversion, and as late as 321 Constantine was still minting Sol Invictus coins. But he was taking a growing involvement in the Christian church and by 325 he was certainly a full fledged Christian. But he was also an emperor, and like Augustus before him, he wanted religion to be well maintained. So at the height of the Arian controversy, he called the Council of Nicaea and took an active part in the deliberations, including devising the key word, homoousios, that the council settled on.