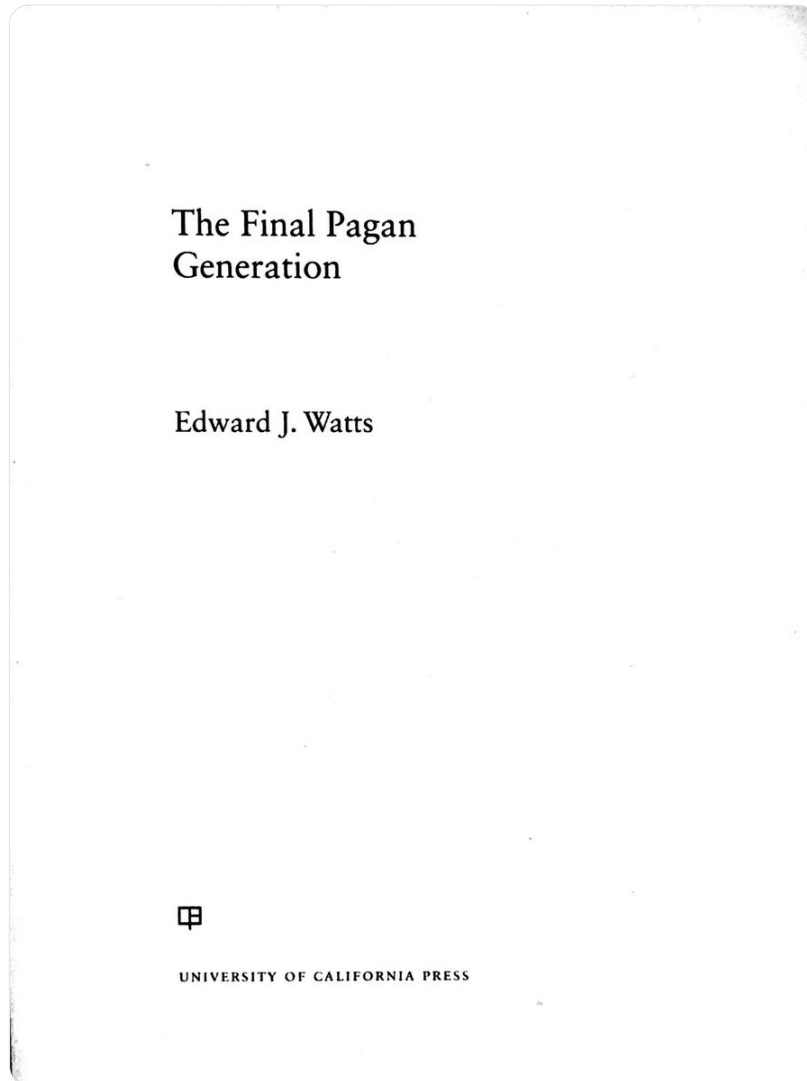




Nemets @PyotrNemets

Jul 22, 2019 · 23 tweets · [PyotrNemets/status/1153197367086075904](https://twitter.com/PyotrNemets/status/1153197367086075904)

Thread with excerpts from Edward Watts' "The Final Pagan Generation"



ways, on the doorposts, and even in the windows of every single house, were completely torn down and scraped away" so that there no longer remained any trace of the god.⁷

The destruction of the Serapeum was a momentous event, second perhaps only to the Gothic sack of Rome in 410 for the amount of attention it received from contemporary sources.⁸ In the same way that the sack of Rome shocked an empire unaccustomed to questioning its military superiority, the disappearance of Serapis's temple in Alexandria highlighted the vulnerability of large centers of traditional religion that had once seemed a permanent fixture of Roman life. However, like the sack of Rome, the destruction of the Serapeum was both a singular event and the culmination of a longer process. In retrospect, many events clearly prefigured the Goths' capture of Rome under their king Alaric: the Gothic migration across the Danube, the Roman defeat at Adrianople, the emperor Theodosius's peace treaty with the Goths, Gothic anger following the battle at the Frigidus, and Alaric's years of aggression in Greece and Dalmatia. Alaric's attack emerged from a set of historical trends that had been developing for nearly forty years. Romans knew that these things were happening, but no one imagined that they could actually result in the capture of the city of Rome. In fact, before Alaric, few imagined that Rome could ever again be sacked. When Alaric actually breached the city's walls, however, he fundamentally altered assumptions about what was possible in the Roman world.⁹ He revealed to all the existence of a new world in which barbarians truly threatened the very existence of Roman imperial power.

Young pagans and Christians saw theirs as a defining struggle of their era. The older pagans, having grown up in a stable, prosperous, and supermajority pagan society failed to grasp the importance of the religious strife.

whom belonged to the generation born following the death of the first Christian emperor, Constantine, sometimes contrast markedly with those of the pagan and Christian elites born in the 310s and early 320s. These younger pagan and Christian religious warriors were born into a world in which Christianity was clearly ascendant. They anticipated its destructive and transformative power, and as they matured, they came increasingly to understand that the dawning new religious order threatened the very existence of traditional Roman cults. Men like Rufinus and Olympus saw the conflict between a rising Christianity and traditional religion as the defining struggle of the fourth century, and they fought hard to advance the interests of the religious community with which they identified.

Older men did not see the world in this way. They generally shared neither their juniors' interest in creating sharply defined religious identities nor their tendency toward violent religious confrontation. The temple destructions and Christian provocations of the 380s and early 390s dismayed these older men, but, unlike some younger men of similar social and economic station, they did not violently resist these acts. They reacted instead as if they could not imagine a world in which traditional religious practices did not have a part. They had good reason to think this way. This generation was born during or immediately following a time of Christian persecution when the old gods had ruled, without interruption, for thousands of years. They were raised in the politically functional and economically prosperous environment created following the third-century stabilization of the Roman Empire by the tetrarchy. The empire of the fourth century depended on an administrative system in which locally prominent men could play important ad-

Roman religion's best modern equivalent is Hinduism - diversity of ceremonies, gods, and temples that permeate a society.

could not be a regular part of most people's daily routine.

Fortunately, Alexandrians did not have to go far to encounter a temple. Neighborhood temples filled the city. They likely took many forms and ranged from imposing structures like the Serapeum to structures so modest that a distracted passerby would not notice their presence (see fig. 3). The diversity of Hindu temples one sees in cities in modern India can perhaps help one to imagine this type of environment. If one takes the city of Mathura in Uttar Pradesh as an example, a driver along the main highway to the west of the town will see massive temples like the Jai Gurudev mixed in with temples like the small one dedicated to Hanuman just four-tenths of a mile to its southeast (fig. 4) and another of similar size two miles to its north. Within the cities, one sees even greater diversity. The area around the center of Jaipur, for example, houses major temples like the Birla Mandir (fig. 5) and much smaller ones that are barely larger than a full-grown man (fig. 6). The bigger temples in India tend to have more visitors and dedicated attendants, while smaller temples attract less traffic and are not regularly staffed, but temples of all sizes play an active role in the larger religious life of Hindu communities.

One can see evidence that temples in the later Roman world functioned similarly. Rufinus's description of the Alexandrian Serapeum indicates the presence of a more or less permanent staff of priests and devotees of the god. In the neighboring city of Canopus, one hears about a philosopher who took up residence on the site of the large Serapis temple there and answered questions posed by visitors.⁵ Smaller temples, by contrast, were likely not staffed regularly. Priests and priestesses were summoned when their expertise

After Christians gained tolerance & patronage from Constantine, they quickly began dreaming of depaganizing the Empire by ending rituals and destroying monuments.

Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* shows that the years bracketing Constantine's victory over Licinius saw Christians begin to imagine a Roman world that not only tolerated Christianity but even welcomed its widespread physical and social presence.⁴⁷ Constantine himself apparently endorsed this goal and tried to further it through a series of legislative and administrative measures.⁴⁸ Some of these explicitly favored Christianity. Constantine exempted Christian clergy from financial obligations to city councils,⁴⁹ he supplied Christian bishops with large amounts of money and goods that they could use to support their congregations,⁵⁰ he paid for the construction of new churches, and he gave bishops a form of judicial power that they could use to manumit slaves and resolve legal disputes within their communities.⁵¹

Offering privileges to Christians and support for the church represented only part of the struggle, however. The emperor and his advisers also began to think that the de-paganization of the empire formed an essential part of its Christianization. A Roman state in which Christianity assumed a legitimate visibility while one waited on the emergence of a divine empire was no longer enough. Instead, the empire of this world could become more Christian—but only if it simultaneously became less pagan. This was no easy task. Even if one ignored the political challenges associated with

directing anti-pagan activity in an empire that was perhaps 80 or 85 percent pagan, the suppression of the non-Christian elements of Roman society was extremely difficult, energy intensive, time consuming, and expensive.⁵² Christians then faced practical limits on how much de-paganization could really be done. They not only had to imagine what a new religious order could be like, but they had to decide what pagan elements of the Roman world could, if necessary, be allowed to remain. They then needed to come up with policies that might further these goals.

Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*, a work written soon after Constantine's death, provides a rough sketch of what some Christians seem to have decided.⁵³ In it, Eusebius discusses a *nomos* (literally, a law) issued immediately after Constantine took control of the Eastern half of the empire in 324. This *nomos* forbade provincial governors and their superiors from offering sacrifice.⁵⁴ Eusebius then continues by stating, "Soon after this, two laws were promulgated about the same time; one of which was intended to restrain the idolatrous abominations which in time past had been practiced in every city and country." Eusebius explains that it also required that "no one should erect images, or practice divination and other false and foolish arts, or offer sacrifice in any way."⁵⁵ A second law was connected to this and ordered officials to build churches according to specified dimensions, "as though it were expected that, now that the madness of polytheism was wholly removed, pretty nearly all mankind would henceforth attach themselves to the service of God."⁵⁶

The model of de-paganization that Eusebius here describes is rather roughly sketched, but it did have an underlying rationale.

Eusebius drew on two strands of thought. The first was the long-standing Christian abhorrence of sacrifice, a view laid out in depth by numerous second- and third-century Christian authors.⁵⁷ The second strand was far older and evoked the only case Eusebius knew about in which a religious group claimed to have successfully suppressed an established traditional religion. This was the account of the Israelite conquest of Canaan in Deuteronomy, a story in which God commanded his people to "demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods."⁵⁸ Eusebius imagined that Roman paganism would die away in the same way that traditional Canaanite religion did if sacrifice was restricted, temples torn down, and the emperor readied churches for the new Christians his policies would create. A Christian empire filled with churches and believing congregations would naturally emerge, but only as a result of Roman de-paganization.

Expensive and drawn out litigation was a feature of Roman life much as in ours.

owed them money.¹³⁰ One claimant apparently hoped to approach Spectatus in order to settle with him separately. This would have ensured that one of Phasganius's heirs acknowledged the debts, and then would have given the creditor a better chance of collecting money from Libanius.¹³¹ When this did not work, the creditor sent messengers to the estate threatening the peasants who worked on it with punishments for "crimes against the imperial house" if they remained in place and continued to pay rent to Libanius.¹³²

These problems proved to be manageable, but their management took the greater part of two years and a considerable amount of political capital. Libanius had to fend off the council, he needed to convince Spectatus to hold out against a compromise that would have made his life considerably easier, and he worked to enlist the support of a *comes rei privatae* (an official who managed the imperial properties) in order to prevent the further harassment of his tenants.¹³³ He owed this success in large part to the network of friends and family members with which he had been exchanging letters and favors for years. Other heirs with less robust networks had more trouble. Sebon, a Cretan friend of Libanius, had been willed an estate by a man who had visited him. The dead man's brothers contested the will, and the slow, expensive fight went on for more than four years.¹³⁴ Libanius was fortunate that he was able to wrap up his lawsuits in a little less than half that time.

Emperor Constantius pushed increasingly anti-pagan policies in the 350s. These were mostly symbolic policies, leaving pagan elites discomfited but still unresponsive.

imperial religious politics. The emperor had overcome a series of political challenges in the first half of the 350s that, by the end of 355, left him free of serious political opposition. This enabled him to act against traditional religion more forcefully than any emperor had before. By the time of his death in 361, Constantius had mandated the death penalty for those who sacrificed, and tried to cut off access to pagan temples. This was what Christian thinkers like Eusebius and Firmicus Maternus had hoped to see since the initial euphoric moments after Constantine's unification of the empire. To them, the Christian Empire was at hand.

Their enthusiasm would likely have confused members of the final pagan generation like Libanius or Themistius. They certainly did not approve of the sort of policies that Christian extremists like Maternus had been pushing, but they also saw little that could be gained by actively opposing them. Most temples remained open despite the laws, statues and images of the gods stared down from every corner of cities, public sacrifices continued to be offered in many parts of the empire (including in Rome itself), and the traditional religious routines of households throughout the empire could continue unaffected. At the same time, there were careers to advance, honors to be earned, positions to be gained, transfers to better jobs to be secured, deaths to mourn, issues of inheritance to resolve, new marriages to arrange, and fun to be had. This was not a good time to raise concerns about ineffectual religious policies or to wage foolish crusades against a powerful emperor. It made much more sense to swallow one's discomfort with a set of largely symbolic policies and work with the emperor and his administration. While great rewards awaited those who could succeed in doing so,

principled opposition to the regime promised nothing and posed significant risks. On balance, these seemed like foolish risks to run.

Themistius and Libanius embody the spirit of the times. Both men had serious reservations about aspects of Constantius's reign, but each of them put those reservations aside and delivered glowing panegyrics of the emperor that greatly pleased him. And both were richly rewarded for this. Themistius first became a senator, then served as a trusted emissary of the emperor, and ultimately rose to become the most important figure in the senate of Constantinople. Libanius received an imperial chair of rhetoric in Constantinople and an additional grant of income from imperial estates to induce him to stay in the capital. He even nurtured strong enough relationships with influential people that he was able to keep this income when he eventually moved home to Antioch. Other members of this generation obviously did less well. Ausonius seems to have had a quiet decade, and Praetextatus likely did too, aside from a governorship of Lusitania.¹³⁵ All of them, however, chose cooperation with the emperor over resistance to him.

In retrospect, one could certainly fault men like Themistius and Libanius for pursuing their own personal objectives instead of actively opposing the religious and political initiatives of Constantius. But they can also be forgiven for failing to imagine that the religious policies of Constantius pointed the way toward a future in which traditional religion was marginalized. The final pagan generation clearly took the easier path in the 350s, but their decision to do so was understandable. And, as the 360s dawned, their prudence

Emperor Julian the Apostate's rise to power is almost a pagan version of Constantines - an Emperor raised in a different faith who overcomes long odds with divine aid.

In some important ways, the situation that Julian confronted in February 360 resembled that faced by Constantine when he confronted Maxentius nearly fifty years earlier. Like Constantine, Julian faced a strong opponent who would use the same techniques that had won a series of previous civil wars for him.¹¹ Also like Constantine, Julian proceeded against that opponent with what he felt was the backing of a supreme power. The reports of this vary, but Ammianus said that the Genius of Rome appeared to Julian the night before he was proclaimed Augustus and told him that it "desired to place him in a higher position."¹² Julian himself claimed, "I prayed to Zeus . . . I entreated the god to give me a sign; and thereupon he showed me a sign that told me to yield and not oppose myself to the will of the army."¹³

Accounts of Julian's divine blessing spread as part of a delicately crafted propaganda campaign designed to make him seem both magnanimous and favored by the gods. In March 360 he offered to share power with Constantius, but when the offer was turned

Julian had been raised as a Christian, but he "had nursed an inclination towards the worship of pagan gods, which gradually grew into an ardent passion as he grew older."²³ While Constantius lived, "fear of the consequences had kept him from practicing its rites, except in the greatest possible secrecy." When Constantius died, "this fear was removed," and Julian ordered "that the temples should be opened, sacrifices brought to their altars, and the worship of the old gods restored."²⁴ A pagan emperor again ruled the Roman world.

Julian's turn away from Christianity had been more gradual than Constantine's conversion to it, but the circumstances of his life made Julian embrace his new religion just as tightly. Julian's entire public career from 355 to 361 had been a sequence of improbable successes. He won military victories along the Rhine despite a lack of command experience and actions in battle that put him at great

27%

personal risk.²⁵ He had survived as a Caesar for six years despite Constantius's suspicions of those with whom he shared power. And, most miraculously of all, he had emerged victorious following a rebellion against an emperor known for systematically and cruelly destroying usurpers. Julian could not help but believe that the gods had chosen and supported him throughout his most unlikely rise.²⁶

Julian purged relatively few Christians, but ended the light persecution of pagans. He picked pagan and philosopher courtiers for patronage.

likely rise.

Julian arrived at Constantinople with a few immediate objectives, the most pressing of which involved cleaning up the excesses of Constantius's later reign. This involved limiting the ostentatiousness of the court, punishing those of Constantius's advisers who had participated in the investigations of regime opponents, and walking back the emperor's religious policies. In December, Julian convened a tribunal of five men in Chalcedon and charged it with investigating high officials who may have abused power in the later years of Constantius's reign.²⁷ According to Ammianus, eleven men were charged at Chalcedon. One was acquitted. Six other men were sent into exile, and four (including the notorious Paul the Chain) were executed.²⁸

While Ammianus makes much of the tribunal at Chalcedon, complaints about these types of investigations are so common in Roman historiography as to be almost formulaic. The Chalcedon trials actually involved a relatively small number of people, most of whom were singled out primarily because of their role in the execution of Julian's brother Gallus.²⁹ In reality, the tribunals targeted only a small number of officials who had served under Constantius, a number that increases only slightly if one includes figures like the former prefect of Gaul Florentius who decided to go into hiding ra-

ther than face the possibility of investigation.³⁰

This did not mean that the change of regime had no consequences for others who had enjoyed high positions under Constantius. Julian had very different ideas about the nature of his court than his predecessor had held. Ammianus says that Julian immediately dismissed all of those who staffed Constantius's imperial palace when he learned how much money the imperial barber made each day.³¹ Others close to Constantius could not be fired in quite so abrupt a fashion, but they did see their influence evaporate as they were pushed out of public life. Julian dismissed a host of imperial secretaries and turned over many of the higher offices in the state.³² Because Julian hoped to create a court befitting a philosopher, he replaced these courtiers with some of the intellectuals who had taught him.³³ Among the most prominent of these was the philosopher Maximus of Ephesus, who, Susanna Elm has argued, was to be to Julian what Themistius had been to Constantius.³⁴

Julian is best known, however, for his recalibration of imperial religious policies. His own paganism drove this shift, but some of his initiatives were defensible on practical as well as confessional grounds. Between Constantine's conversion and Constantius's victory over the usurper Silvanus in 355, imperial policy had carefully worked to create a reality in which traditional religion slowly melted away.³⁵ It was only after 356 that Constantius began to reach aggressively for this goal by proposing specific penalties for sacrifices, closing some temples, transferring others to the Christian church, and allowing materials taken from temple sites to be reused in new construction.³⁶ This was an extreme policy, especially when paired with the actions that Constantius took against

1 min left in chapter

27%

Nicene Christians like Athanasius of Alexandria, but it was consistent with the other autocratic excesses of his later court.

After Constantius died, Julian reset this dynamic. Sacrifices were reinstated, temples were reopened, and Nicene bishops were recalled to their sees. Because Julian forcefully advocated his pagan beliefs, these actions have been seen as somehow revolutionary. They were not. The empire had nominally prohibited sacrifices since at least 324, but the first law against sacrifices with enforceable penalties appeared only five years before Julian's accession.³⁷ And, while the law was technically enforceable, not only do we know of no person ever prosecuted under that law, but we have a great deal of evidence that public sacrifices continued to be performed between 356 and 361.³⁸ *Theodosian Code* 16.10.4, which forbids access to temples, similarly seems not to have been widely enforced even if it was technically enforceable.³⁹ In these cases, Julian simply reversed an ineffective policy that had been in place for only a relatively short time.

Far from a simple conservative, Julian understood the need for a strong and vital pagan faith that preserved its identity while dealing with issues the Christians had previously monopolized.

Julian's program involved more than simply undoing the policies that Constantine and (especially) Constantius had put in place to limit traditional religion. It reflected the ideas of a child of the 330s who had been born in Constantine's empire, was educated under the careful supervision of Constantius and his Christian associates, and entered adolescence just as his cousin started to implement his vision of a Christian empire. Julian understood intimately both Constantius's goals and the institutions that he used to further them in ways that average members of the final pagan generation could not. Unlike those older men, Julian understood that Constantius's initiatives pointed toward a world in which traditional religious practices were suppressed and temples replaced by churches. That frightening thought prompted Julian to build new institutions that would strengthen non-Christian cults and return a more traditional religious balance to the Roman world.⁴⁴

Julian thus decided to revitalize traditional religion in ways that had not previously been tried. As a part of his response, Julian created a pagan priesthood modeled on the system of imperial administration in which worthy figures were appointed governors (*achieros*) of all of the temples in a defined region.⁴⁵ While their fundamental duty was to encourage men not to violate the laws of the gods,⁴⁶ their conduct was in every way to be guided by the principles of philanthropy. Julian broadly defined philanthropy to include sharing "money with all men" even with the wicked and the Christian, because all humanity fundamentally derives from a common origin.⁴⁷ His priests were to care for others by providing them with instruction and by sharing clothes and food with them because such generosity is inherent in the proper worship of the gods.⁴⁸

Pagan elites helping their friends out regardless of their of their religious affiliations.

Most intriguingly, Libanius helped friends work around some of the very religious initiatives that he elsewhere praised. Shortly after Julian's death, Libanius characterized the emperor as "one who revived sacred laws . . . raised up [the gods'] dwellings, erected altars, gathered together the priesthood that was languishing in obscurity, resurrected all that was left of the statues of the gods, [and] who sacrificed herds of cattle and flocks of sheep."¹³³ Despite this enthusiastic approval of Julian's policies, Libanius would repeatedly ask that his friends and family members be spared punishment when any of Julian's religious laws disadvantaged them.

In the spring of 363, for example, Libanius asked Alexander, the harsh governor of Syria, to help a man named Eusebius who was accused of trying to block the restoration of sacrifices at a festival. In his appeal, Libanius simultaneously expresses general support for Alexander's policy of encouraging sacrifices while asking that he decline to punish one who has "recently sacrificed, thinks what he has done is terrible, and once again praises abstinence from sacrifice."¹³⁴

Libanius showed himself equally willing to help friends avoid the teeth of Julian's efforts to restore and rehabilitate temples and sacred statues. Both Constantine and Constantius had torn down some temples, but abandoned or poorly maintained temples would have been a much more widespread problem during their reigns. When a building came down or fell into disrepair it was only

Like the Protestant Reformation, state fiscal desires (in this case seizure of pagan temples) seem to have played a role in religious shift.

Valens faced a different, less visible type of crisis as well. They had taken over an empire that could not pay the bills previous emperors had accumulated and could not cover the future promises that Julian and Jovian had made. Much of the blame lay with Julian. Julian had cut tribute payments in many different parts of the empire,²⁰ and he had also forgiven a large number of debts owed the treasury.²¹ He led an army of perhaps sixty-five thousand people into Persia, spent a great deal of money supplying it, and promised significant bonuses to his troops during the campaign.²² In addition to increasing expenses and cutting revenues, Julian reduced the total amount of property that the imperial government owned—an important resource that emperors could use to address food or revenue shortfalls.²³ He returned to temples the properties that Constantine had taken from them, he returned to the cities civic estates that Constantius had taken over, and he gave properties to friends as gifts.²⁴ But Julian's fiscal mismanagement represented only part of the problem. The two brothers also still needed to pay the donatives that Jovian had promised his soldiers as well as the gifts the troops expected of them as new emperors.²⁵

those left to the third-century emperor Aurelian (an allusion whose significance would be clearer if the books of Ammianus's history covering the reign of Aurelian had not been lost),²⁶ and Eutropius characterized Julian as "having a mediocre concern for the treasury."²⁷ The recognition that a fiscal emergency existed and the willingness to pay for its resolution were two different things, however. And while this crisis was a severe one, Valentinian and Valens could expect little patience from the people while they addressed it, and no gratitude if they raised taxes in order to weather it.²⁸

The emperors saw the empire's fiscal situation as both an immediate crisis and a long-term structural problem. They began addressing it through a series of aggressive and unpopular actions. They immediately reinstated the crown gold tax that Julian had suspended—and expected cities to send it twice, once each for Jovian's accession and for their own.²⁹ They took back imperial control over the civic and temple estates that Julian had given to municipal and religious officials.³⁰ They removed the curia from the first stage of tax collection, entrusting this task to members of the staff of provincial governors, who could be punished more easily if things went wrong.³¹ By 366, they issued a law requiring the melting into ingots of all gold coins tax collectors took in so that "every avenue of fraud shall be eliminated" for those collecting, conveying, and registering the taxes.³²

The most unpopular part of their response consisted of levying large fines and collecting overdue debts. Ammianus characterizes Valens's father-in-law, Petronius, as one who "condemned the innocent and guilty equally" by charging them huge penalties for debts that reached "to the time of the emperor Aurelian."³³ Although

Late 4th century shift in Roman elites pursuing careers in the Church over the state or bureaucracy.

fathers once had. These students of the 350s and 360s built networks of peers through the same kinds of drinking parties, kidnappings, and hazing rituals that Libanius and his peers experienced in the 330s.² And they emerged from the classrooms fired by the same sorts of ambition that powered Libanius, Ausonius, Themistius, and Praetextatus through the 340s and early 350s. For young men like these, the social debts and obligations they owed to the family members and friends who helped them get established bound them to the imperial system just as tightly as they had their parents. Like their parents, they were products of a world designed to use their talents, reward their efforts, and control their reactions.

Some elite children proved more difficult to control. Much of this had to do with the emergence of new ways for demonstrating elite achievement that worked differently from the established municipal and imperial models. Elites had customarily taken little interest in service within the church. Clergy and even bishops had tended to be people of middling rank who could pursue careers in the church but lacked the background, means, or the social standing to hold high municipal or imperial office. Beginning in the 370s, however, men who had once served as teachers, advocates, and even imperial governors entered into bishoprics, a trend that accelerated as the fifth century approached.⁴

Late 4th century Church officials had great authority and influence from their wealth and the masses of faithful. Bishop of Rome already one of the most important men in the Empire.

only somewhat on the imperial system. This and their higher social status meant that they were less easily cowed by emperors than some of their socially middling predecessors had been. Nevertheless, many of the traditional metrics for elite achievement still applied to bishops.²⁶ Bishops publicly represented their communities in many of the same ways that leaders of city councils had, they continued to be responsible for managing estates in the way that large landholders did, and as episcopal visibility grew in the later fourth century, big-city bishops came to possess a title that carried with it an understood social prestige.²⁷ The prerogatives of office also enabled some bishops to look out for the financial and social interests of friends and members of their families.²⁸ Bishops were responsible for and answerable to congregations. They also needed buildings and administrative staffs to perform their duties. If they proved too problematic, emperors could marginalize bishops by separating them from all of these resources and supporters.²² Emperors still possessed some tools to control the conduct of these men.

By the 370s, large urban churches controlled such sizable property portfolios that the middle-class bishops of the late third and early fourth centuries no longer had the administrative experience necessary to administer their finances.²² Churches now needed bishops who knew how to manage large estates, diverse properties, and complicated political relationships. This led them increasingly to turn to talented members of the upper class to manage their affairs. In return, the churches offered these men a way to do recognizably elite activities in a new context of Christian service. The wealth and influence that came along with these positions even prompted Praetextatus to remark facetiously that he would convert to Christianity if the Christians would make him bishop of Rome.²³

Mid-fourth-century bishops had developed powerful voices that allowed them to serve as effective patrons for their followers. Many of the middle-class bishops of the early fourth century managed to do this, but as Ambrose's later career shows, the elite bishops of the late fourth century could do far more than their predecessors. They came to the job already possessing social relationships with influential figures, familiarity with the imperial appeals process, knowledge of how to organize and conduct an embassy, and training in how to use the language of the cultured elite to advocate for friends and associates.²⁴ Those who had served as governors or advocates also had professional training that directly prepared them for the ecclesiastical courts in which they would hear civil lawsuits and mediate disputes between congregants.²⁵ Bishops now needed many of the same skills that helped prominent people maintain their place in the world outside of the church.

These elite church officers sought a type of success that depended

In the 380s, Eastern Empire turned pagan holy sites into museums, while the Western Empire confiscated pagan property. No doubt the state profited immensely from its new property, in an eerie foreshadowing of the monastery seizures in the Reformation.

brought the interests of these two different types of elites into direct conflict. Unlike Valentinian and Valens, the younger emperors of the 380s had little interest in preserving the effective pagan-Christian détente that the imperial system and its custodians had supported since the death of Julian. Between 379 and 384, a series of measures were carried out to reduce the public presence of traditional religion. In the East, these largely consisted of laws designed to act against what were considered foundational elements of traditional religious practice. This began in December 381 with a law that prohibited diurnal and nocturnal sacrifices while also forbidding anyone to approach a temple.⁸⁸ Those who violated its terms were to be proscribed. A law issued in November 382 further clarified the situation. It concerned a temple that contained images that “must be measured by the value of their art rather than by their divinity.”⁸⁹ These images, the emperor declared, were to be protected, and the temple that contained them was to remain open, “but in such a way that the performance of sacrifices forbidden therein may not be supposed to be permitted under the pretext of such access to the temple.”⁹⁰ This was a radical change from the way that sacrifices and temples had been treated for most of the past two decades. In essence, these laws represented a final and full reversal of Julian’s religious program.

Gratian took a different approach in the West. In 382, he undertook a series of actions that undercut the financial and practical foundations of traditional Roman religion. None of his actions are preserved directly in the *Theodosian Code*, but other sources discuss their main components.⁹¹ Gratian sanctioned the removal of the Altar of Victory that had been placed in the Roman senate house

by Augustus.⁹² He ended some of the beneficial financial privileges enjoyed by the cult of the Vestal Virgins. He eliminated imperial funding for public cult rituals. And he confiscated the property that belonged to the traditional Roman cults, endowments that had funded rituals and maintained temples for centuries.⁹³ This final measure imperiled the very functioning of the traditional public cults of Rome. It is not clear whether Gratian appreciated the significance of these actions. He may simply have thought them symbolic measures that demonstrated his Christian piety, an important concern after Theodosius’s anti-pagan legislative program and church council in Constantinople had established his own Christian leadership credentials.⁹⁴

To most pagans and Christians living in the Western Roman Empire, the suspension of state support for public cults in the city of Rome would have mattered very little. For some members of the Roman senate, however, these actions fundamentally threatened the religious foundations of the Roman state. Part of this had to do with the idea that the state needed to pay for public rituals if those rituals were to represent true expressions of collective devotion.⁹⁵ There was also an extremely complicated practical problem caused by this new policy. The endowments and cultic estates that Gratian confiscated were immense and scattered throughout the empire. As late as 408, some properties owned by the college of pontiffs in Rome had yet to be reassigned.⁹⁶

In 382, a delegation of some of the more traditionally minded

Pagans tried to preserve their practices using an appeal to Emperor’s civic duty and Roman identity. Christians controlled enough levers of power to prevent the appeal from reaching the Emperor.

Rome had yet to be reassigned.—

In 382, a delegation of some of the more traditionally minded senators traveled to Milan to describe for Gratian the consequences of his decrees. Symmachus headed the embassy—an honor that likely reflects the personal relationship he had established with

446

Gratian during his time in Trier in the early 370s and his mastery of the “idiom of imperial communication,” rather than his great religious convictions.⁹⁷ The embassy carried with it Gratian’s pontifical robes, a tangible reminder of the cultic obligations that traditionally accompanied imperial power.⁹⁸ Perhaps also implicit in this was the reminder that even Constantius had fulfilled his pontifical obligations during the same visit to Rome in which he had ordered the removal of the Altar of Victory from the senate.⁹⁹

In a blow to Symmachus and the traditionalists in the senate, the embassy never met the emperor. They were prevented from gaining access, Symmachus later explains, by *inprobi* (wicked men), a label that deliberately obscures the identity of the men responsible for this slight.¹⁰⁰ It is known that Ambrose had presented to Gratian a letter forwarded to him by Bishop Damasus of Rome and signed by “countless” senators who threatened not to attend meetings in the senate if Gratian reversed these measures, but this letter served only as an excuse for refusing an audience to the embassy.¹⁰¹ The wicked men Symmachus refers to must have been courtiers, with the master of offices (the *magister officiorum*) Macedonius and his staff the most likely suspects.¹⁰² The two bishops and a group of palatine officials had thus managed a successful act of obstruction that prevented Gratian from appreciating the full consequences of the measures he had taken against traditional religion. They had also sent a clear message to those accustomed to working through the imperial system that legitimate appeals brought forward through official channels could be frustrated by the informal and confused way in which information filtered through to Gratian. Young and middle-aged Christian courtiers could now tip the scales

Shift in religious demographics, weak Imperial state, and strong religious institutions (with important ascetic role) led to increased ecclesiastical influence. Saint Ambrose even claimed veto power over Imperial policy.

The fall of Gratian in 383 saw the wall between the Christian dropouts and elite establishment figures collapse. The frenzied attempt to quickly assemble an effective governing structure around Valentinian II indebted the new regime to a range of Italian and Illyrian military, senatorial, and ecclesiastical figures. When the immediate threat posed by Maximus had subsided, these men scrambled to seize as much power and influence as they could without regard for the lines that once separated ecclesiastical, military, and administrative rewards. Ambrose's assertion of an ecclesiastical veto over imperial policy represented only the most brazen attempt to redefine these boundaries in the leadership vacuum that surrounded the child emperor.

The particular weakness of Valentinian II compelled his advisers to allow figures who had opted out of the imperial administrative system to exercise influence over important decisions that occurred within it. These were admittedly exceptional circumstances, but even precedents set by weak imperial regimes often proved difficult to reverse. The challenge was compounded in the early 380s by the generational shift that Ausonius had tried to manage in the late 370s. The final pagan generation was fading out, and the empire was steadily passing into the hands of a younger generation that had less faith in and ties to the social and political regime of their parents. While many remained devoted to the imperial system, some, like Ambrose, prized religious goals over the stability and institutional inertia that their parents usually pro-

ected. The growing resonance of these outsider voices would soon come to threaten the broad religious and social consensus that the final pagan generation expected the imperial system to preserve.

Rome was far from a gerontocracy

Demographics help explain the social pressures pushing older men out of public life. Although we often think of the senate and city councils as bastions of elderly, experienced former magistrates, they were actually bodies made up primarily of young and middle-aged men. The minimum age for membership in the Roman senate in the imperial period was twenty-five. In the high empire, 14–16 percent of the senate was between twenty-five and twenty-nine years old, and an additional 25–28 percent was be-

tween thirty and thirty-nine. By contrast, only 11–13 percent was between sixty and sixty-nine, and perhaps as little as 5 percent was over age seventy.¹⁴ The Constantinopolitan senate before which Themistius rose in 383 would have been even younger, as Theodosius's ongoing efforts to build its membership up to two thousand inevitably drew in primarily younger men.¹⁵ Probably more than 90 percent of Themistius's audience in 383 was made up of men younger than him.

Christian and Pagan sources provide two entirely separate stories about a riot and the local response. The Emperor credited both parties for their services, merely desiring loyalty.

Though they shared the common purpose of saving Antioch, dropouts like Chrysostom and establishment figures like Libanius describe their efforts on behalf of the city in very different ways. Libanius saw the riot as an unfortunate event for which the councillors and former government officials in Antioch had no responsibility.⁸⁸ While they tried to discuss the tax rationally with the governor, an uncontrollable mob set off to find the Christian bishop Flavian. When they could not locate him, they began burning and destroying symbols of imperial power.⁸⁹ Christian rabble-rousers

caused the violence, but Libanius assigns to himself a key role in resolving the crisis.⁹⁰ He claims that he sat with the commissioners and calmed them down so that they would be ready to hear the appeals of Antiochenes.⁹¹ Ellebichus and Caesarius were among Libanius's correspondents, and Libanius had a particularly well-developed relationship with Ellebichus, for whom he had written a panegyric in 385.⁹² While the commissioners were in town, Libanius claims to have argued Antioch's case, asked for imperial clemency, and convinced the commissioners to hear appeals from Antioch's leading citizens.⁹³ In his telling, Libanius tamed Ellebichus and Caesarius with "orations and tears,"⁹⁴ and "personally was held responsible" when the city was pardoned.⁹⁵

Libanius indicates that the appeals for mercy coming from the Antiochene elite reached beyond the imperial commissioners. Perhaps influenced by senators who had ties to Antioch, the senate of Constantinople directly petitioned the emperor to spare the city.⁹⁶ Libanius contrasted the efforts of Antioch's leading citizens with the flight of Christians.⁹⁷ It was no surprise that when Theodosius's letter of clemency reached the city, it came through conventional channels. It went first to the imperial commissioners and then was read aloud by Ellebichus in the same courthouse in which the investigation began.⁹⁸ For elites like Libanius, lower-status Christian outsiders caused this crisis, elites (both pagan and Christian) working within the confines of the old imperial social and administrative system calmed it, and the ceremonial resolution of the crisis came in a public building used by imperial officials and civic notables.

The Antiochene Christian leadership described a completely

different course of events. According to John Chrysostom, the traditional elites fled Antioch, and the new Christian establishment stepped up to save the city. Instead of the city council organizing appeals and sending embassies, the bishop Flavian traveled to Constantinople so that he might appeal to the emperor in person. Then, when Caesarius and Ellebichus arrived in the city, they were met not by Libanius and members of the council but by a flood of ascetics who "had been shut up for so many years in their cells." They came before the commissioners "ready to shed their blood" and "declared that they would not depart until the judges spared the entire city."⁹⁹ The amazing thing about this, Chrysostom continues, was that these men had once "forsaken the city, hastened away, and hid themselves in caves," but they returned to save it at a time when many of Antioch's most prominent residents fled.¹⁰⁰

While Chrysostom credits the monks with saving the city from the immediate wrath of the commissioners, he explains that Flavian earns the most credit for its final salvation.¹⁰¹ Flavian not only intervened with the emperor directly when in Constantinople,¹⁰² but he even (supposedly) spoke with Ellebichus and Caesarius while they were on their way to Antioch.¹⁰³ In Chrysostom's telling, Flavian calmed the commissioners before they reached Antioch, the monks stayed their hand while they were there, and the bishop then "won renown with both God and man" by heroically convincing Theodosius to pardon the city.¹⁰⁴ Chrysostom even credits Flavian with sending his own emissary to the city so that the emperor's decision could be communicated through Christian channels before the imperial commissioners learned about it.¹⁰⁵ This triumph belonged entirely to the rising Christian church, its heroic bishop,

and the Syrian ascetics.¹⁰⁶ According to Chrysostom, "those who were in power, those who were surrounded by great wealth, and those who possessed great influence with the emperor" deserved no credit for the city's pardon.¹⁰⁷

Libanius and Chrysostom present two parallel accounts of the Riot of the Statues. Each describes the heroic actions of one part of the Antiochene community and refuses to give any credit to another, equally engaged part of the city. Both Libanius and Chrysostom deliberately omit the contributions of others, but it is likely that neither account fabricates the actions of the figures whose contributions it celebrates. When Theodosius and his advisers learned about the riot in Antioch, they seem to have understood that they needed to forgive the city in a way that acknowledged the influence of conventional elites like Libanius and less conventional figures of authority like Flavian. Theodosius made it known that he heard appeals from both Flavian and the Constantinopolitan senate. He sent an older pagan commissioner with a military background (Ellebichus) and a younger Christian civilian administrator (Caesarius) as his two investigators. And he approved as the Antiochene council voted to erect bronze statues honoring the two commissioners, and as its churches were filled with praises for the imperial clemency. Theodosius was not, as has sometimes been argued, signaling that only Christian actions prompted his decision to spare the city.¹⁰⁸ Instead, once Theodosius decided to pardon the Antiochenes, it was very much in his interest to allow as many Antiochenes as possible to take credit for convincing him to be merciful. He had given all of the influential figures in the city a gift of public recognition, and they now owed him debts of gratitude that

With no fear of Imperial authority, Christians attacked pagan shrines & temples with support of friendly local officials. With no extralegal authority, pagans were only able to beg for state to protect them.

The Riot of the Statues prompted two very different coalitions of influential figures to work toward the same objective.¹⁰⁹ The religious policies of the mid-380s and early 390s forged a different dynamic. The ascetics and bishops celebrated by Chrysostom pushed imperial authorities toward ever more aggressive anti-pagan and anti-Jewish actions, while older men like Libanius worked within the confines of the imperial system to slow things down. These septuagenarians cared about the temples,¹¹⁰ but they sought to protect them by working through the same formal and informal procedures that they used to blunt the effect of mid-century religious policies. In earlier decades, appeals to imperial officials and requests for special treatment limited the effect of both anti-pagan policies and Julian's pro-pagan religious reforms.¹¹¹ Unfortunately, the nature of the assaults on traditional religion had changed by the 380s, and actions taken within the confines of the old imperial social and administrative system now worked less well.

In the East in the 380s, the most devastating assaults on traditional religion came not from emperors and governors but from people working outside of the formal imperial administration. After a burst of legislative activity in 381 and 382 that prohibited diurnal and nocturnal sacrifices while also forbidding anyone to approach a temple,¹¹² the consistory remained largely silent on mat-

“shrines of the idols” and “consigned [traditional rites] to oblivion.”¹¹⁷ Other Christians agreed with Theodoret. Prudentius, for example, saw the Theodosian-era temple destructions as the final step that prefigured a rush to the church.¹¹⁸ John Chrysostom and Gregory Nazianzen claimed that the actions of Theodosius formed a sort of persuasion that would lead to traditional religion collapsing in on itself.¹¹⁹ This was, of course, the path toward a Christian empire first proposed by Eusebius in the 320s, and the one that had guided imperial policy in the 340s and 350s. Now, however, the push took on a new form. Change was effected not by laws issued from the court but by actions taken by monks, bishops, and other Christians who operated outside its political constraints.

This was what particularly troubled Libanius. He knew how to mobilize his network of friends to protest against and slow down the implementation of anti-pagan measures that came through official channels. It was far more difficult to respond effectively to situations in which imperial officials like Cynegius encouraged extralegal actions taken by monks, bishops, and others outside the imperial system. This was asymmetrical religious warfare that Libanius and his peers were ill equipped to fight. They could not match the tactics of their opponents, but Libanius still responded as forcefully as he could.

Oration 30, a text that apparently dates to the period immediately following Cynegius's departure from Syria, serves as Libanius's first effort to respond to this new and troubling dynamic.¹²⁰ The speech begins with a *prooemium* in which Libanius claims to be a valued counselor who advises the emperor on policy matters. Libanius then describes how the current situation corresponds to the pol-

ters relating to traditional religion for the next decade. The only law to appear between 382 and 391 essentially reiterated prohibitions previously laid out. Theodosian policy, however, went beyond what legislation spelled out. The emperor issued no laws ordering the destruction of temples, but he tacitly sanctioned this activity in ways that challenged formal administrative models. The most notorious assaults came during the praetorian prefect Cynegius's inspection tour of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt in 386–88. As a part of his official duties, Cynegius set out to survey his territory in the hope that he could identify ways to rebuild the strength of local curia. The nature of the tour changed quickly, however, as monks and bishops traveling along with him destroyed temples in Mesopotamia and Syria and sacked shrines in Egypt.¹¹³ Cynegius certainly approved of these assaults, but his campaign was only a part of a larger sequence of events in which imperial administrators either encouraged or simply turned a blind eye toward Christian violence against non-Christian sacred sites. In 387, after Cynegius's tour moved into Egypt, an unnamed *comes Orientis* attempted to cut the sacred grove at Daphne outside of Antioch.¹¹⁴ Then, in 388, a group of Christian monks and their bishop burned down a synagogue in the garrison town of Callinicum.¹¹⁵

All of this activity was done in such a way that the emperor could conveniently feign ignorance, but Christian thinkers understood what Theodosius aimed to do. Theodoret prefaces the segment of the fifth book of his *Ecclesiastical History* in which he discusses temple destructions with a celebration of Theodosius's unique achievement. No emperor, not even Constantine, had destroyed temples,¹¹⁶ until Theodosius ordered the destruction of the

icies regarding temples set by the emperors who ruled during his lifetime. He starts with Constantine, an emperor whose embrace of Christianity caused “absolutely no alteration in the traditional forms of worship.”¹²¹ Libanius then moves to Constantius. He acknowledges that Constantius banned sacrifices, but he asserts that this happened simply because the weak emperor was dominated by his eunuchs and court attendants.¹²² Julian restored sacrifice, but Valentinian and Valens restricted it again, permitting only the offering of incense.¹²³ Theodosius, Libanius claims, has upheld this policy. He has also “neither ordered the closure of temples nor banned entrance to them.”¹²⁴ However, the “black robed tribe, who eat more than elephants . . . hasten to attack the temples with sticks and stones and bars of iron, and in some cases, disdaining these, with hands and feet. Then utter desolation follows.” These were, of course, monks, who, Libanius later makes clear, were encouraged in these actions by bishops.¹²⁵ This is, Libanius asserts, not only an illegal action, but one that is “nothing less than war in peace time waged against the peasantry.”¹²⁶ An effective emperor must stop it.

When the last pagan generation passed, religious violence on both sides began to be glorified.

ple destruction represented a throwing down of “the remnants of idolatry” and a purification of a site long cherished by Christians.³ Later representations of Theophilus celebrated the Serapeum destruction as the defining moment of his career. An early fifth-century Alexandrian chronicle included a picture of Theophilus standing atop a statue of Serapis (see fig. 14), a visual parallel that linked his anti-pagan efforts to those of earlier Hebrew prophets.⁴ The notion that a bishop should act aggressively against traditional religious sites eventually became so ingrained in the fifth-century Alexandrian Christian community that Theophilus came to serve as a prototype of ideal episcopal behavior.⁵ Some ascetic communities also quickly adopted the idea that ascetics should act aggressively against traditional religion and its practitioners.⁶

Pagan authors similarly idealized the actions of figures who resisted Christian attacks on the Serapeum. Olympus, a Cilician philosopher who had come to Alexandria in order to worship Serapis, led the defense. He guided the defenders through regular worship and superintended a final ceremony through which Serapis abandoned his temple.⁷ Rufinus attacked him as “a philosopher in name and garb only” and the “leader of a criminal and impudent band.” Pagan sources, however, celebrated him as a “man who was not human but entirely godlike.”⁸ Other pagan teachers who participated in the defense also saw the Serapeum destruction as a defining moment in their lives. The grammarians Helladius and Ammonius both spoke proudly to the Christian historian Socrates Scholasticus about their roles in fighting Christians during the Serapeum siege. Ammonius complained about the abuse done to traditional religion before the violence started, and Helladius bragged about killing nine Christians with his own hands during the defense of the temple.⁹ Even figures with no direct connection to the fighting were remembered primarily because of their ties to the Serapeum. The philosopher Antoninus once predicted that “the temples would become tombs” because of the move by Christians to place the bones of martyrs on former cultic sites. Although Antoninus died before the Serapeum assault, Eunapius says that the event

Strongly recommend this book. Modern parallels are that a movement built around an identity closely linked to a state (pagans/conservatives) being incapable of defeating a rival movement with parallel power structures (Christians/leftists) that competes for state power.

[@Rjrasva](#) [@blog_supplement](#) [@omarali50](#) [@EvanPlatinum](#) [@123456789blaaa](#)
[@Horacethe1st](#) [@ByFisted](#) [@June_beetle](#) [@qin_duke](#) [@ChrisNahr](#) you all might find this thread & book interesting

• • •