

3. Barbarians

This is the data on religion from the last British Census, carried out in 2011:

Christian	59.3%	(down from 71.7% in 2001)
No religion	25.1%	(up from 14.8% in 2001)
Muslim	4.8%	
Hindu	1.5%	
Sikh	0.8%	
Jewish	0.5%	
Buddhist	0.4%	
Not stated	7%	

In 410 c.e., when the Roman state withdrew from Britain, the current leader was already on top. After a few centuries under pressure, it bounced back to what we assume was more-or-less 100% when the period covered by this essay ends. Since then it has been consistently dominant. I suspect that 59.3% is its lowest since then.

The theme of this essay is beliefs, and it will begin by looking at three phases in the evolution of beliefs in the Roman world. These were:

- Mixing: this tends to occur when different cultures are in contact for a long period.
- Cults: minority rituals and beliefs establish small communities that tend to be exclusive.
- Dogmatism: inclusive forms spread and are adopted and enforced by a state.

The historical period we are considering is from the Roman withdrawal from Britain to the Norman invasion in 1066. This is a crucial period for the establishment of one form of the Christian dogma across Western Europe. I will note in passing, three further phases in the evolution of this religion that occur only after this period.

Paganism

The Romans recorded their religion and to a much lesser extent, the religion of the Celts who occupied Britain before them. Both show a pattern found in most of the other recorded beliefs of the period. It would not be surprising if this pattern goes back at least to the time of the builders of Stonehenge and further. It can be called “paganism”.

To get an idea of what ancient “paganism” might have been like, you can look at modern Hinduism, the most widely practised religion of India. Hinduism has many Gods representing the many different aspects of life. For example, there are Gods of war, beauty, fortune, motherhood, light, darkness, etc. There are rituals associated with each of them, from leaving tokens at shrines to feast days of tremendous energy, colour and noise.

These rituals tend to be very important to the people involved. They regulate their lives and bond them to their neighbours. They can also give people a sense of belonging to a much larger community with whom they share common stories, or “myths”. A myth is a fictional history that accounts for something, the existence of a tribe for example, and its claim to a territory. Myths also tend to underpin morals.

The idea of “beliefs” in paganism is more difficult to pin down. They do not tend to make strong factual claims. Their stories are set in a different time and place about which it would be absurd for

any human to claim to know anything with certainty. To say you “believe” in a story of magical animals doing impossible things in unseen, parallel worlds, is really to say you accept it as part of your heritage, and believe in a truth it is telling, a moral truth for example.

The Celtic world, being much smaller, would not have been as diverse as modern Hinduism, but it seems likely that it had many Gods, rituals and stories. Their lives were probably regulated by special days and festivals. We know a lot more about Roman mythology, which is closely related to the Greek version. In fact, the Romans had most of the same stories as the Greeks, but with small variations and different names for the characters.

There is a Roman myth that begins with the great father God, Jupiter. He sees a beautiful female Titan, which is a kind of Giant, and impetuously makes her pregnant. He then remembers a prophecy that his son will dethrone him, so he swallows the Titan. She survives inside him and causes him to have headaches. Eventually the pain gets too much for Jupiter, and he allows one of his rivals to split open his head, and the Titan's daughter, Minerva, escapes.

Minerva brings poetry, music, wisdom, weaving and commerce to the human world. It's generally agreed that she is the Roman equivalent of the Greek God, Athena. This is an example of a myth that shows variation in its transmission from Greece to Rome. There are many others, such as the stories of Janus, Saturn, Mercury, Apollo, Mars, Orcus, Diana, Venus, etc..

Of the Celts, including the Britons, Julius Caesar wrote that they had three types of “priest”: Vates, who did soothsaying, that is to say, predicting the future, and natural philosophy; Bards, who spoke the verses of the deeds of the Gods, and Druids, who were responsible for worship, sacrifice and ritual. Historians, who have connected these things with Irish religious practices that survived into recorded times, along with oral traditions, suggest that they learnt all three skills over a long time, and also did genealogy and law. It's reasonable to put all the British priests together, and call them “Druids”.

Pliny the Elder, the Roman historian, said that the name was derived from the word for Oak, reflecting their veneration and special knowledge of the tree and a form of its fruit, mistletoe. Caesar wrote: “They are said to learn large numbers of verses; some remain in training for 20 years. They do not believe it lawful to commit this law to writing, and yet from most public and private purposes and accounts they do use Greek letters. It seems to me that there are two reasons for this practice, one is to prevent their knowledge spreading among common people, while the other is to prevent their students losing their memories by relying on writing.”

So the Druids had a long education, memorising sacred words. We also know they were Judges and their leaders were chosen, either by clear seniority or vote if the position was contested. During the Romans period, from the 1st to the 5th centuries c.e., their Gods mixed with the Roman's. Minerva, for example, became identified with the Sulis of the Briton's. When a Druid's sacred spring was turned into a bath house, in the town that is now Bath, in England, inscriptions were made showing its dedication to the Goddess Sulis-Minerva.

The rise of Christianity

The Roman Empire was big and diverse, and some people, especially soldiers, moved a lot. In an empire stretching from Britain in the North West, to Judea in the south east, criss-crossed by trade networks and military roads, it was easy for ideas to be transmitted. By the 3rd century, many Roman writers make reference to “cults”, usually critically.

The most popular ones at the time were probably those of Isis, Dionysis, Mithras and Jesus. The

cult of Mithras was a powerful contender for domination at one point, but the ultimate winner was the cult of Jesus, which in the 4th century, became the Roman state religion of Christianity. Where did it come from? And, how did it win?

The simple answer to the first question is that Christianity came from Judaism. The Holy book of Judaism, written mostly in the 6th century b.c.e, contains a lot of laws. The main creed is that there is one God, which is called “monotheism”, in contrast with pagan “polytheism”. In my view, this difference is often exaggerated. For the ancient pagans, for example, a God simply meant any immortal being with superhuman powers who lived in a world we can't see. Christians believe in Angels, who fit this definition. At the same time, Pagan systems usually had a dominant God, who ruled over Angel-like lesser immortals.

Because Judaism has a tradition, of disputed age, that God has chosen a nation for salvation, it is almost always identified with one particular nation (or race) the Jews. With a long history of being persecuted minorities in foreign nations, the Jews evolved a belief system based on prophets, scripture and communion. They believed that God would speak to them through prophets who would lead or save them.

During the Roman Empire, the language of the eastern empire was Greek. The Greek word for “to save” is Christos, and a person who saves, which in English would be “Saviour”, in Greek is “Christ”. The Christians began as a group of Jews who believed that God had sent someone (in particular) to save them. But from what, the Romans? Or perhaps death itself?

The form of Christianity that grew fastest was the one associated with a man called Paul of Tarsus, or “St Paul”. He lived in the early 1st century, and identified a man called Jesus as the prophet. For Romans, Kings could be Gods, while for Jews this was impossible. Paul achieved a kind of half way position by describing Jesus as the Son of God. With subtle adaptation like this Christianity very gradually gained widespread popular appeal. Its most effective selling points however, are probably that it didn't challenge the powerful, had a strong sense of communion and promised an afterlife to anyone.

In 224 c.e., Rome's main rival in the East got a new dynasty and adopted a unifying, state religion. There is no direct evidence that this had an effect on Rome, but it seems possible to me that a unified, powerful, religiously-inspired rival neighbour, contrasted sharply with the developing chaos and scepticism in the Empire. It must have been obvious to Roman rulers that with plague, financial crises and barbarian invasions, it would be good for the Empire to have a unifying sense of purpose. It would also be helpful to have a Priesthood to heal factions, transmit the law and inspire the religious duty to fight.

In 284, the Empire was split, with rival powerful families in the Latin west and Greek east. It was reunited and split again in 306. This time it's western leader, Constantine, lead an army to conquer the eastern capital at Byzantium. With everything at stake he superstitiously marched behind a cross, a Christian symbol. After he had defeated his rivals, at the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, he began promoting Christianity. In 380 it was declared the state religion.

The state version of Christianity soon became a dogma, and persecuted its rivals. A long history of crushing, by argument or by force, so-called “heresies” followed. Known opposition movements to the established church include Arianism, Luciferianism, Catharism, Donatism, Nestorianism, Marcionism, and more.

As the Roman state broke up, it was taken over piece-by-piece by Barbarian aristocracies. Each, eventually, subscribed to the Roman church. In return they got Royal coronations with God's

authority and a Church now acting as a kind of diplomatic and arbitration service. All the Church asked for in return was the suppression of other dogmas. The Roman church became known as “Catholic”, from Greek meaning, “universal”, that is to say, the only right one.

The power of the Church crossed many people speaking many languages across Europe, so it stuck to its original language, Latin. This gave the priests a lot of power, because only they could understand the Bible and interpret it. Their dogmatic authority lasted until the 15th century in Europe, when Universities, printing presses and towns full of independent thinking people developed. It is then that the further stages in the evolution of Christianity, which I mentioned earlier, began.

The fall of Rome

The Roman state in the West broke in the 5th century. Why this happened is still disputed by historians. Here are some possibilities:

1. Within the Empire economic relations may have become routine, slowing down innovation and growth.
2. On the edges of the Empire trade with the barbarians may go untaxed, causing money to flow out.
3. As the barbarians militarised and their economic activity broadened, the supply of slaves may have fallen and therefore their price may have gone up. This would hit the manors that relied on large scale slave labour.

Here are some things that we know did happen:

4. From 235-284, a series of 26 Emperors increased the size of the army and raised soldiers' pay by debasing the currency, producing inflation.
5. In 250-266, there was a catastrophic plague that cut the population, dislocating trade and causing a ripple effect of economic problems.
6. The 3rd century also saw several attacks on the Empire by Barbarians that would also have reduced the population and disrupted trade.
7. In 284, the Empire split in two, making its less productive western side more vulnerable to crises

The system could have survived economic crises, but:

1. As the burden of taxes increased more free Romans became indebted to landowners.
2. As the money economy in some areas declined and the price of slaves increased big landowners had work done by people who were in debt to them.
3. Formal arrangements evolved with tied peasants and so-called “potentates”, in which the peasants could be called on to defend the potentates property.
4. This, plus the lack of money to supply the army well, led to a fall in recruits, leading to a weakening of the Empire's defences
5. Roman potentates and Barbarian chiefs, inside and outside the boundaries of the Empire formed fighting forces by networks of loyalty and obligation that proved stronger than the Roman armies.

While there is a lot in here that is hypothetical, the financial crises, shortages of money to pay soldiers and the rise of the potentates is well documented. It is also not disputed that between 410-476 the Western Roman Empire, fell. We should remember that we are talking about the end of a particular state structure. Significant changes, like the relations of power in the countryside,

occurred well before the so-called “fall”, and some institutions, like the powerful Church, continued long after.

The dark ages

The period after the Roman Empire in Europe is called the “Dark Ages” from two metaphorical uses of the word “dark”. The first is because it was a time when there was less writing, so historians know less about what was happening at this time. In this case, the English word “dark” is used to mean, harder to see or understand. The other meaning of “dark” is bad, scary or evil.

Some historians say that the dark ages weren't that dark, in the first sense. They say that there is a lot of writing and evidence but we have inherited a Roman bias. Finding good data on this is difficult, but it seems that from the period 0-800 c.e., 2,000 manuscripts have been found (of the later part of the period, overwhelming written by monks and mostly parts of the Bible). From the period 800-900 c.e. 7,000 have been found. Such a big difference is probably more than just an effect of time and selection. It suggests that the actual amount of writing rose significantly toward the end of the time we are looking at. It is as good a date as any to mark the end of the dark ages.

Were these times “dark” in the other sense? Were they scary times to live? Let's do a thought experiment. Imagine you are a young man, 16 years old, the son of a Romano-British aristocrat and you live near the western coast of Britain. One day some ships arrive carrying men whose language you don't understand. They catch people and kill anyone who resists. They take you and put you on their ship. Some days later you arrive in a strange land, where you spend 6 years as a slave. Forced enslavement seems to have been a real danger to people in vulnerable areas. Fear and insecurity must have been intense.

This story is exactly what is thought to have happened to a man who called himself Patricio, which means Patrician, a Roman aristocrat. He is now known as Patrick, or St Patrick, and the strange land he was taken to was Ireland. After looking after sheep as a slave for 6 years, he escaped, and eventually found his way back to his family. It seems likely that he must have met some good people while he was there. He may well have learnt that while slavery was an evil, people aren't. Everyone has the potential for good or evil inside them. He became a Christian missionary to Ireland. Now his day is celebrated throughout the English-speaking world on 17th March.

In this time of fear and insecurity, it is possible that people accepted a milder form of slavery in preference to a worse kind. This is called “serfdom”. It works by a man without land swearing an oath to a Lord, who gives him some land, and becomes his Judge and Commander in times of war. In return the serf accepts duties to the Lord, including staying on the land, working on his Lord's land and joining his Lord's army when necessary. This system is called “feudalism”.

The departure of the legions in 410 c.e., left Britain vulnerable to slave raids. A governor called Vortigern, who claimed the title King of the Britons, hired some Barbarians, called Jutes, to help defend his coast. This is a very Roman thing to do and requires money, but Vortigern didn't have enough. When he failed to pay them, the Jutes rebelled against him and established the Kingdom of Kent (which is now the name of the county nearest the Channel).

It seems quite likely that all the Romano-British chiefs who had accepted Vortigern as King, abandoned him and accepted the Jute King. This is because there are no more Romano-British Kings after that, except perhaps one.

One thing about the darkness of the dark ages is that it leaves space for the imagination. A monk writing in 540, mentions a battle and a victorious King called Arthur. Another, writing several

decades later, describes a weak King as “no Arthur”. In the 9th century, another suggests he won several battles. A legend is developing. By the time we reach the 12th century, French romantics have given him a Round table, a Holy mission and a story of courtly love.

It is quite likely that a King called Arthur existed, probably in the early 6th century. He may well have been a Romano-British Christian fighting the Pagan Anglo-Saxons. He may have achieved some kind of unity, perhaps by some blend of charisma and compromise. Beyond this, nothing more certain can be said of Arthur.

It is also worth adding a small note of context to the Arthur story. There is some tentative evidence that at the time, there was interaction, collaboration or even mixing amongst Anglo-Saxons and Romano-British. When a Saxon chief landed on the south coast in 495 and established the Kingdom of Wessex, it's recorded that his name was Cedric, which is a Romano-British name.

Meanwhile, raided and slavers, like the ones who captured St Patrick, were widespread. Evidence of the insecurity is the burying of valuables. Sometimes the fleeing people who buried them didn't come back, which is a tragedy for them, but a gift for archaeologists. Several “hordes”, have been found, which tell us a lot about Dark Age life in Britain. The Hoxne horde, for example, of 15,000 objects had been buried in about 407. It includes coins minted in Roman times, and coins minted by Barbarians just before the horde was buried. The Roman coins are clearer, bigger, have more gold and silver in them and are clearly better made than the one's made by Barbarians.

The Anglo-Saxons

The word Anglo-Saxon has come to mean anything to do with the Anglophone countries: Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It can also be used as a broad racial category, meaning people related to the majority races of these nations. This makes sense because a common ancestor of all of these people is the group of tribes originally called the Anglo-Saxons, who settled in England in the 5th-7th centuries.

They are believed to have come from an area of Europe that is now called Saxony, in Northern Germany. It's believed that at least 3 waves of migrations occurred, perhaps related to changes in the climate and the search for land. The first was probably around 450, and the last around 580. Anglo-Saxon place names are found throughout what is now England. The endings “-ham”, for example in “Fulham”, for a small village (we still say “hamlet” for a very small one), and “-ton”, for example in “Walton”, for a bigger one (perhaps with a wall or ditch), are signs of where they settled.

They introduced into Britain a system of farming that seems to have been common amongst the Barbarians from what is now Germany. It was probably better suited to Northern Europe than the one the Romans had used. It was called the “open field” system, and involved having a village with 3 fields. At any one time, one field would be laying “fallow”, that is to say, not being used while it recovers its fertility.

The fields being used were divided into strips to make it easier for a team of Oxen to plough them. Families would own individual strips but the Oxen would be owned by the village and used by the whole village working together. This affected the character of the old English village, which is typically arranged around a village green with fields on the outside. The spread of these methods probably increased productivity allowing the population to gradually increase. Seen from the perspective of agriculture, the end of the Western Roman Empire was not a “fall” at all.

The Anglo-Saxons were pagans. They had many Gods, including a big father God called Odin, or

Wodin, and a warrior God called Thor. They have stuck in our English words for the days: Wednesday and Thursday. As the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms expanded and spread west it was the perfect time for a Christian hero King, like Arthur. In fact, it was a good time for legends of all kinds.

One story says that in the year 597, the leader of the Church in Rome, Pope Gregory, was walking around a slave market. He saw a young boy with blond hair and bright blue eyes, which was quite unusual, and asked where the boy had come from. The answer was the North east of Britain. The Pope then said that the boy looked like an “angelus”, Latin for angel, and that God was giving him the message that these people should be Christian.

The Pope's phrase stuck, and the people became known as “Angles”. He sponsored a mission to convert the Angles to Christianity. This last part of the story is certainly true. Later that year, St Augustine, with 40 Italian monks, arrived in Kent, on the South East coast. They were welcomed by the King, who had earlier married a Christian woman. They made friends with Kings and Lords and spread out gradually across the country.

At some point, they must have crossed paths with the missionaries coming the other way. When St Patrick returned to Ireland, his mission gave rise to a strong, independent Church. He inspired many monks to do what he did and convert foreigners. There was for example Pelagius, a Briton, who drew from the experience of St Patrick, and argued, not only that everyone has the potential for good and bad within them, but they also have freewill, the power to choose which way to go.

Augustine, the 40 monks, and the Roman church, didn't agree. They said that all humans are sinful, we are really like animals, unless God speaks to us. So for the Roman church, we don't have freewill, only God has the power to decide what we will do and whether we end up in Heaven or Hell.

There was another slight difference between these 2 kinds of Christianity. It was all about how you get into Heaven (or get sent to Hell). For the Irish-style Christians (the ones inspired by Pelagius and Patrick) all you had to do was believe in Christianity. So you'd get into heaven if you were one of them, *or* if you were with the Roman church. For the Roman church Christians, to get into Heaven you had to be a Christian *and* you had to recognise the authority of the church. So the Irish-style Christians wouldn't get in.

In 664, King Oswiu of Northumbria, the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in the north of what is now England, staged a debate to decide what type of Christianity he would go for. It was called “The Synod of Whitby”. Missionaries from both sides argued while he sat in the middle asking questions. It turned, in the end, on the decisive question of getting into Heaven. Oswiu weighed up the answers and said, well if I believe in the Irish-style version and I'm wrong, I won't go to Heaven, but if I believe in the Roman version and I'm wrong, then I will still go to Heaven. So, on the grounds of this calculation he chose the Roman church.

When King Caedwalla of Wessex invaded the Isle of Wight in 686, the last of Anglo-Saxons became Christian, all with the Roman church. Within 90 years of arriving, Augustine's mission had eliminated paganism in Britain.

The Vikings

Western Europeans had traded with the Scandinavians for generations. As well as exotic things, like amber and Walrus Ivory, they had bought the usual, slaves. Scandinavian slavers had developed a thriving trade, exploiting and starting wars amongst the many isolated tribes along the Norwegian

coasts. Their ships got better and eventually they would reach the British coast. The first recorded raid was on the small island of Lindisfarne in 793.

Just like the Anglo-Saxons, raids eventually turned into conquest, and in 866 they took the city of York and made it their capital. One by one the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms fell, until the Scandinavians, usually called “Vikings” controlled the whole of England. In fact, it was they who took the “ang” or “eng” from Anglo-Saxon, and added their own word “lund” or “land”, to give us the word “England”.

The final battle in their long conquest was in 878, when the Viking King Guthrum defeated King Alfred of Wessex. Alfred escaped, and the story goes that he hid on an island in the marshes at a place called Athelney. Here he spent the winter sending out messengers in secret, building a new alliance of Anglo-Saxons. To escape Viking rule, the Anglo-Saxon lords had to get over their tribalism and become a nation.

When the time was right, they met and declared Alfred King of the Saxons. Soon after this, in 886, they took London, and forced a negotiation with Guthrum. The Treaty of Wedmore drew a line across England. The North would be controlled by the Vikings (in fact, it became part of the Danish empire), while the South would be under Alfred, who was declared, using the official language of the treaty: “King of all the English not ruled over by the Danes”

Alfred had come from a family that had kept up the old Romano-British tradition of sending its sons to Rome. He had studied Roman philosophy, history, law and the art of governance, and he had the idea that to become a nation, the English had to be educated. He wrote and translated books, and his reign was praised by people during and after. He is also credited with saving the English from foreign oppression, although in fact, England passed between foreign hands for the next 3 centuries, with only short periods of local rule.

Earlier I mentioned there were 2 senses of the word “dark” in “Dark Ages”: one was a relative lack of writing and the other was of bad or evil times to live in. By the first meaning we are now coming out of the “dark ages”. By the second it is more difficult to say. The Vikings were still raiding throughout the 10th century. In 991, after a raid in Essex, the English King, Ethelred the Unready, got rid of the Vikings by paying them in gold. This led to a permanent tax being levied. Naturally, the Danes kept coming back for more. The word “unready”, by the way, is an old way of saying badly advised.

In 1002, after supposedly hearing rumours of a Danish plot to kill him, Ethelred issued a command that all Danes in England were to be killed. This would have resulted in a massive civil war and bloodbath. As far as we know his order was only carried out where the Danes were a small minority, like in Oxford, where they were burned in the Cathedral. The inevitable war with the Danes began in 1013, and ended with the victory of the Danish Prince Cnut in 1016.

There is a story, familiar to all British people, that King Cnut, around 1028, stood on a beach and ordered the tide to turn back. Most British people were taught this at school and remember Cnut as a foolish King. It’s hard to imagine however, that anyone, even a King, could really be that stupid. In fact, either Cnut *or* the man nearly 100 years later, who wrote the story, was making a point. The King was showing to his lords and advisers, as memorably as possible, that just being a King sometimes isn't enough. His power isn't infinite. As an island on the edge, Britain can't live forever in isolation from its continental neighbours.

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