Chapter 5
Extinction: Polytheism Unreformed

Abstract This chapter surveys the religions that became extinct. While we have no reliable information about the Celts, the Germanic religions had scanty professional priesthood, so they offered little organize resistance to conversion; in Iceland the assembly voted for the adoption of Christianity. In Greco-Roman religion both the pantheon and the priesthood continued unchanged in the empire. The elective cults multiplied but never challenged the civic religion, while the non-professional priests of the latter had no incentive to address the growing overlapping of divine jurisdictions and the consequent inefficiency of the cult. So nobody in the system had an incentive to resist Christianization of the empire.

5.1 Celtic Religion

Our account of the demise of Celtic religion can be very brief. As we have seen in Sect. 3.1, the religion of the continental Celts had been overlaid by Roman religion in the long centuries of Roman rule over Gaul and Iberia, giving rise to a fusion product where names and attributes of the gods mingled and their cult was similar to that of the Roman gods with local characteristics, usually captured by epithets. So the history of its extinction is part and parcel of the Christianization of the Roman Empire (discussed in Sect. 5.3.3 below). The druids, whose prominence in Celtic religion was so obvious to the classical writers, were already targeted by repressive imperial decrees in the first century CE as, presumably, focal points of native resistance to Roman rule; so, by the time the Christian conversion campaigns swept Gaul, they must already have been a pale shadow of what they had once been and went down in silence.

As to Ireland, the information at our disposal is no better (Fletcher 1997, Chap. 3). As we know, we have no independent sources on the pagan religion itself and scholars have had to decipher divine figures and beliefs lying underneath epic tales of heroes and demons written down by Christian monks many centuries later. So it is hardly surprising that the monastic accounts of Christianization depict a seamless, triumphal process of defeating ignorance and superstition, smiting the demons, and putting the evil sorcerers and witches of yore—that is, the druids—to shame. The mission to the

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Irish started with St Patrick in the fifth century, and all sorts of miracles and wonderful achievements were retrospectively put down to him in the sources. He must have in fact started the process of conversion, ordained priests, initiated (Latin) literacy for his clergy in a pre-literate society, and laid the foundation of what would become the central institution of medieval Irish Christianity—monasticism. But what we have here is not a "history" of conversion. As another example, it is likely that the other great patron saint of Ireland alongside Patrick, St Brigid, never existed but was the Christianization of the great pagan goddess Brigid, from whom she took over many attributes, supernatural deeds, and legends, as well as her feast day.

5.2 Germanic Religions

Many Germanic tribes crossed the imperial frontier in the twilight of the Western Roman Empire and in the fifth century CE founded successor states in its western provinces, from Gaul to Spain to North Africa (Fletcher 1997, Chap. 4). Making a virtue of necessity, since the frontiers were becoming impossible to defend, the emperors consented to their settlement as barriers to further barbarian invasions, but on condition that they converted to Christianity. This they did, but for some reason they chose the Arian creed, a version of Christianity that had been declared heretical at the council of Nicaea in 325 CE but whose missionaries had been able to make a dent in the tribes when they were still outside, but close to the imperial frontiers. These tribes finally came around to orthodox Nicene Christianity in the sixth century. Anyway, since we have no information whatsoever about their traditional religion—except the assumption that they must have shared a good deal with the Germanic peoples we already met in Chap. 3—their conversion does not concern us.

Another Germanic people with a great future—they established a kingdom in Gaul that lasted for three centuries—were the Franks, who unlike the tribes mentioned above entered the empire as pagans. Then, around the year 500, again unlike the other tribes, King Clovis converted to orthodox Christianity prompted by his queen, who was a Nicene Christian princess from another tribe. Although we again don't know anything about the Franks' pagan religion, this story is solidly documented and is interesting for us because it establishes a pattern. Clovis was initially reluctant to do his wife's bidding because he feared that his men would not follow him along. Then he faced a decisive battle with another Germanic tribe, and being under great stress he invoked the help of the Christian god, promising to convert if he won—exactly a replica of Emperor Constantine's famous conversion. He did win, took some religious instruction from the local bishop, and finally was baptized with other family members and "thousands" of his warriors. We may discount such magical thinking and belief in miracles and surmise strategic behavior behind Clovis' actions, but this is how many conversion stories were circulated and, presumably, believed; as pointed out in Sect. 1.2, in the ancient world belief in preternatural events, miracles, gods' epiphanies, and the efficacy of spells was widespread and considered part of "normal" human experience. Be that as it may, we will find this pattern again: the

role of the Christian queen, the preoccupation to bring along the aristocracy, and the paramount importance of an expectation of victory in war or expansion of royal power as an incentive to switch religious allegiance. It also established a model for missionary activity that would be followed everywhere outside the territories of the Roman Empire of old: a top-down process, where the mission aims to convert the king, his family, and his nobility, and then the rest of the people will be carried along by hook or crook—the opposite of the bottom-up process that had marked the rise of Christianity in the empire.

For this pattern to function, however, there must exist a king to be converted first, so it cannot easily be applied to peoples that are organized in multiple local chiefdoms and which jealously defend their independence (Fletcher 1997, Chap. 7). Such were the Saxons of northern Germany, who stubbornly resisted the missionaries and were finally conquered by the Frankish king Charlemagne in a series of wars spanning more than 30 years toward the end of the eighth century. The Saxons' motives to resist the Franks were a mixture of political independence from foreign rule and attachment to their traditional religion and way of life. Charlemagne crushed them with a savagery unprecedented in the history of Christian conversion, executing thousands of prisoners and deporting many more, and finally imposing universal baptism and capital punishment for any backsliding or any showing of heathen practices.

Unlike their continental cousins, the Anglo-Saxons of Britain present a history of conversion that conforms to the top-down pattern exemplified by King Clovis of the Franks (Fletcher 1997, Chaps. 1, 4). King Aethelbert of Kent converted around 600 CE under the influence of his Frankish Christian wife and a missionary sent by the Pope; some of his nobility converted with him but not all, and so did some, but not all, of his vassals ruling adjacent kingdoms. Next came King Edwin of Northumbria, who took baptism with his chief men in 627 CE again with the assistance of his Christian wife and a Roman priest. His decision, after a long hesitation, was triggered by a vow to convert if he should win a war with a nearby kingdom, which resulted in a great victory, and after his baptism the king strongly promoted missionary activities within his kingdom; the impact of the whole operation, however, seems not to have been deep as Edwin's successors reverted to paganism.

Edwin's story, as recounted in the eighth century by the great English church historian, Bede, provides some interesting details of the procedure and motives of the decision. Edwin convened a council of his advisors and noblemen where the Roman priest explained the tenets of Christianity. Then the high priest Coifi, who was in charge of the gods' shrines and cult (and whom we met in Sect. 3.2.2 above), declared that being devoted to the gods all his life had brought him no tangible benefits, so turning to the new god might indeed be worthwhile. After this, a councilor declared that unlike the old religion, the new doctrine gives men some valuable knowledge and assurance about what is to come in the next life—suggesting a longing for something that would endure beyond man's often unavailing struggles in a cold and hostile world. Here we see that the new faith was strong just where the old one had been weak (Davidson 1964, 221–222). So the king agreed to embrace Christianity and Coifi himself proceeded to destroy the idols and the temple forthwith.

As the chief priest at a royal court, Coifi must have been first of all a priest of Odin, the god of the kings and of battle. So, underneath his words can perhaps be sensed the bitterness toward the fickleness and treachery of this god that is often expressed in Norse poetry and sagas (Davidson 1964, 50–51, 70–72). Odin cannot be trusted, as he often assigns victory capriciously, regardless of his warriors' loyalty; he is renowned for wisdom and cunning but is not concerned with justice among men. In this he differs from the ancient Germanic war god Tyr, who was associated with law and justice and who seems to have been displaced by Odin in the Viking age (see Sect. 3.2.1 above). "It would not seem as though Odin was a god whom men could love or respect, although they feared him, and gloried at times in his heady power" (ibid, 72). So, as mentioned in Sect. 3.2.1, allegiance outside the aristocracy seems to have shifted from Odin to Thor, a god of nearness, who was seen as a friend of the common but independent man when engaged in war, at sea, or on his farmstead, and a protector (as a sky god) of the community at large, on which fell a good part of the mantle of old Tyr. The frequency of personal names and place names called after him all over Scandinavia testify to his popularity. At the close of the pagan age he was hailed as the god who had challenged Christ to meet him in single combat, and who came down to earth to personally fight with a Norwegian king who was championing Christianity (ibid, 73–75).

Thus, in the course of time, we have clear signs of evolution of beliefs and change of allegiance occurring within the traditional Norse pantheon, not toward outsiders to the pantheon like in the Roman Empire (see the next section). In turn, this suggests a disposition to "choose" one god or goddess—usually Thor or Freyr and Freyja—for one's special friend and protector, although this did not prevent him from acknowledging the existence of the others or from taking part in communal festivals in which all the gods were honored. "The worship of the old gods was a very individual affair, suiting the independent people who practiced it" (Davidson 1964, 219). Consequently, since everything in that world was seen as hanging on being true to one's word and mutual trust, the question whether to forsake the old religion for the Christian faith was seen as one of keeping or breaking one's pledge to gods who had always been one's loyal supporters. Hence, many tried to carry on with mixed allegiances, worshiping Christ but also turning to Thor on certain occasions, or erecting altars to both Christ and the old gods in a single temple as did King Redwald of East Anglia in the seventh century. Of course this could not go on for long in a Christian milieu, but it testifies to the difficulty for these men to swallow the new idea of exclusive worship of one god.

Beyond the promise of a life after death that was open to all, and not just to a warrior aristocracy, the expectations of the common people from the new religion were the same as those of the kings discussed above: the ability of Christianity to satisfy the quest for material security and welfare. This was a natural attitude for people accustomed to think of "their" god as a protector from the vagaries and threats of life. This is candidly spelled out in a letter that a bishop wrote to the apostle of the (continental) Saxons, St Boniface, in the eighth century (Fletcher 1997, 251–252). He argued that the pagans must be brought around by persuasion, not by force (an advice blatantly ignored by Charlemagne a generation later, as we have seen). If the

pagan gods, he went on, were really as mighty, beneficent, and just as claimed, they would not only reward their worshipers but also smite their foes; but then, why have they spared the Christians who are wiping them out of the world and smashing their idols? Likewise, while the Christians own fertile lands awash with wine, oil, and all kinds of riches, the pagans with their gods are being pushed back and left to rule over cold and miserable lands. To show the truth of this approach, the missionaries resorted widely to miracles—miracles of the weather, on which the supply of food depended, and miracles of healing and exorcism, as well as predicting the future through visions and dreams (ibid, Chap. 8). As pointed out above, the possibility of miracles was widely believed. The same battery of arguments and devices, it must be noted, had earlier been tried and found working in the Christian conversion of the Roman Empire (MacMullen 1984, Chaps. 3 and 4).

So the passing of the old gods was largely a practical matter: in those peoples' eyes, they had found a newcomer—Christ—who bested them on their own ground. There was much in the old religion to be sentimentally attached to but nothing to die for. Moreover, as we have seen, there was little professional priesthood to offer organized resistance to conversion, and what little there was depended on the patronage of the kings; once these had converted, the main prop of the old religion disappeared and its days were numbered. So, according to Bede's detailed records of conversion, which are generally considered reliable by historians, in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms there was little popular opposition to the advent of Christianity.

In the main Scandinavian countries, conversion occurred later and was more of a messy affair (Fletcher 1997, Chap. 11; Parker 2015, 87–89, 98–104, 159–162, 182 ff, 263–264). There were sustained missionary efforts, conducted by English monks or directed by the German bishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, which met with mixed success, with a king converting and missionizing and the successive one switching back to paganism, and with rival factions of local pagan and Christian chiefs vying for supremacy. Also, many warriors and chiefs converted through contact with local Christians in the Viking settlements in the British Isles, and then brought the faith back to their relatives in the countries or origins. Denmark finally accepted Christianity when King Harald "Bluetooth" converted around 960 CE; he and his court came around when the missionary was challenged to submit to an ordeal of fire—a relatively common means of settling disputes at the time—and survived it. Norway saw more strife and occasional violence for about a century, with missionary kings disrupting sacrifices, smashing temples and pagan icons; finally, permanent conversion of the country is considered to have been established by King Olaf Haraldsson (reigned 1016–1030), soon to be canonized as St Olaf. Lastly, the mission to Sweden began in the ninth century but did not make much progress until it gained the first conversion of a king in the early years of the second millennium; even after that, resistance was strong and focused on the great temple at Uppsala (described in Sect. 3.2.1 above) for most of the eleventh century. Finally the last pagan king was killed and the sanctuary destroyed in around 1090, securing the final victory of Christianity in the country.

In Iceland, a colony of free farmers led by local priest-chiefs (*godhar*), there was no king to convert, so the decision to adopt Christianity was made by democratic

procedure—with a twist (Byock 2001, 297–301; Parker 2015, 161–162). All chiefs with their followers convened annually at a general assembly called *Althing* to decide about the law and the settlement of disputes. Some settlers arriving in the tenth century were Christians from the Viking colonies of the North Atlantic islands, and some missionaries arrived from Norway at the urging of a Norwegian king who, however, had no formal authority over Iceland. So by the end of the century the population had a mixed allegiance, with some people honoring both the Christian and the pagan gods. Matters came to a head at the *Althing* of the year 1000, where the two factions argued their respective cases and were, understandably, unable to reach a consensus decision, raising the specter of secession and violence. Then the Christian leader asked the Speaker of the assembly—himself a pagan—to arbitrate the dispute. The Speaker retired to consider matters for an entire night sheltering "under his cloak"—possibly consulting his gods for an answer. The following morning, to the disappointment of his pagan faction, he pronounced that henceforth everyone would be Christian and must take baptism. To help people swallow his decisions, he made some concessions, including that the exposure of unwanted babies continued to be permitted, and that sacrifice to the pagan gods was still allowed as long as it was done in private. But it was then only a matter of time before paganism, deprived of its public face, would wither away to a set of heroic memories in the sagas.

5.3 Greco-Roman Religion

In Chap. 2 we have surveyed Greek and Roman religion from the beginnings to roughly the latter half of the first century BCE, when Rome achieved the definitive submission of the Greek world and at the same time the Roman Republic gave way to the Roman Empire.[1] The Roman conquest of Hellenistic Egypt (31 BCE) conventionally marks the end of the Hellenistic period and opens the Roman period of Greek history. Building on the extensive influence of Greek on Roman religion that we have surveyed for the late republican period, the Greco-Roman religion was the product of the convergence, coexistence, and spread of the two original religions in the unitary imperial system, and it lasted until the Christianization of the empire in the fourth century CE. We now briefly survey religious developments until the end of paganism.

5.3.1 Traveling Gods and Institutions

With the Roman Empire and the establishment of lasting peace across the Mediterranean and beyond, more divine traveling than before could and did take place; *pax romana* included *pax deorum* (the peace of the gods). Some travelling was entirely private and unsanctioned. Merchants settled in faraway places to establish trading

[1] This entire section draws extensively on Ferrero and Tridimas (2018) and the references cited therein.

posts; soldiers were stationed far and wide across the empire and often changed stations of assignment in successive years; slaves—typically war prisoners—were shifted around, then often freed and their free offspring put down roots in the new place. All these groups brought along their favored gods and built them shrines, thus widening the range of cults on offer in any one place; these upstarts occasionally attracted worshipers in their new lands through marriage or other ways.

At the level of civic religion, the changes wrought by Roman rule, especially in the western provinces of the empire, must be differentiated according to the citizenship status of the towns and their residents (Beard, North and Price 1998, Chap. 7). This is because, for most of the pagan period of the empire, Roman citizenship was a privilege differentially granted to individuals, groups, and whole towns, and one much prized and actively sought for—until in 212 CE Emperor Caracalla extended citizenship to most of the free population of the empire. Since citizenship was a precondition for military service, the army camps had an official religious life that was predominantly Roman, from the deities worshiped to the ritual calendar to the forms of ritual—though this did not prevent both officers and troops from worshiping other gods in a private capacity. Next came the *coloniae*, i.e. communities of Roman citizens, often discharged soldiers, settled outside Italy and designed to be replicas of Rome in all respects, including the religious institutions from the pantheon to the principal priesthoods. Then there were the *municipia*, i.e. towns that had been granted the so-called "Latin rights", a subset of the full citizenship rights; these shared some of the Roman features of the previous type, especially the priestly organization. Finally there was the vast number of towns without Roman status, even though they might have included individual Roman citizens among their residents. Here the Romans occasionally resorted to some degree of repression, notably trying to suppress the druids—the native priestly class of the Gauls—who were seen as posing a threat to Roman order (see Sect. 3.1.2), but otherwise left the subject nations completely free to practice their own religions. Understandably, those peoples often sought accommodation with their new masters by "reinterpreting" their traditional gods as variations of, or another name for, Roman deities, so that e.g. Mercury in Gaul and Saturn in North Africa (often hyphenated with a local epithet) came to cover old Celtic and Punic deities respectively.

Besides the spreading of old, localized gods to new places, the imperial age witnessed the birth and growth of new "Oriental" cults (Beard, North and Price 1998, 278–309). As we have seen in Sect. 2.1.2, "Oriental" gods and goddesses, foreign to both the classic Greek and the early Roman pantheons, had begun to travel west and make Rome or Athens their home long before the imperial age. Importantly, several of these (especially Cybele, Isis, and Serapis) crisscrossed the lines of jurisdiction of the traditional pantheon, promising blessings and protection for a wide array of issues. These old acquaintances were now joined by Jupiter Dolichenus—one of many variants of the Syrian god Ba'al—and Mithras—supposedly a "Persian" sun religion, whatever that may have meant to contemporaries. Despite the "Oriental" label, these cults were virtually unknown in the east but spread widely in the western provinces and were particularly associated with the army. Like Isis and Cybele, and even more than them, these gods were less specialized than the traditional gods and tended toward a kind of encompassing jurisdiction—a feature that had the potential

to unsettle the traditional "division of labor" among gods, although the details escape us. We will see in the next section that some of these cults were organized as elective, sectarian groups. Of course, the Oriental religions included such oddities—in Roman eyes—as Judaism and Christianity, including the many Gnostic and other fringe groups and sects that were close to them.

The cumulative result of these processes is captured by the stock of Latin inscriptions (i.e. from the western part of the empire) for the second and third centuries CE (MacMullen 1981, 5–8, 113). Among the deities mentioned in those inscriptions, Jupiter is by far the leader. The 14 gods that come next have different weights in the different provinces; they include half of the twelve Olympians listed in Sect. 2.1.2 (i.e. Apollo, Diana, Venus, Mercury, Liber-Bacchus, Mars) but not the others, a few other traditional Roman deities, and four Oriental gods: Isis-Serapis, Cybele, Dolichenus, and Mithras-Sol. The last two are especially prominent in frontier regions such as the Rhine and the Danube where the settlements were heavily militarized. The corresponding Greek epigraphic record (i.e. from the eastern part of the empire) is fragmentary, but a standard collection of inscriptions from Asia Minor shows a large overlap with the western record: Zeus again ranks first by a wide margin, and the 10 deities that come next include seven of the traditional Greco-Roman deities already included in the Latin inscriptions, plus the good old Greek goddesses Athena and Hera that failed to make it into the western record, and last of all Cybele, the only one of the Oriental gods.

So in the Greek-speaking east nothing of substance had changed from Hellenistic times, despite the Roman domination. In the western provinces, by far the most important change had been the broad establishment of the worship of Jupiter and, after that, of a fairly representative mix of traditional, if heavily Hellenized, Roman deities (including Isis and Cybele, which had been thoroughly domesticated centuries before); only Dolichenus and Mithras were the real newcomers. So even in the late third century CE the old, traditional Greek and Roman gods were alive and well, though joined by a few newcomers. This finding belies once-popular arguments about the dying out of traditional gods under the onslaught of the new cults in the late pagan empire (MacMullen 1981, 126–127). In A.D. Nock's words (quoted in Lane Fox 1988, 83), "there was, if anything, less chance of the Roman Empire turning Mithraic than of seventeenth-century England turning Quaker".

Regarding religious policy, the empire saw the rise of a formal priestly hierarchy: by claiming the title of *pontifex maximus* for himself the emperor, beginning with Augustus, became in a sense the head of the religion. However, this power was never used to dictate religious belief or behavior to his subjects. The emperors often did show a preference for particular gods, lavishing patronage on their cult—especially in the third century CE, when emperors such as Elagabalus and Aurelian endorsed an Oriental, non-Roman deity of universal power (*Sol Invictus*—Unconquered Sun). But this was never meant to imply, let alone impose, a claim to exclusive worship or a disestablishment of the other gods; in short, it was an assertion of relative superiority, not monotheism—Number One, not The Only One. So despite the intertwining of priests and politics from the beginnings of Rome, the widespread notion of "state cult" to describe the Roman system is basically a misconception (MacMullen 1981,

83–95, 102–107). Little else changed with the empire except the rise of a cult to the genius of the current emperor—to wish him fortune and glory—as well as to some previous emperors who had been "deified"; these special cults had specially dedicated priests appointed by the provincial towns as well as in Rome. Other than that, as discussed above, the Roman priestly organization was exported to, or borrowed by, the settlements with Roman status across the empire.

5.3.2 The Elective Cults

As we have seen (Sect. 2.1.3), in the classic Greek world there arose the first hints of what we would today call sectarian groups, separate from, and potentially at odds with, the official civic religion. These were the Orphic and the Pythagorean groups, but they remained marginal throughout antiquity.

In the imperial age, the "elective" cults, i.e. those who drew from a self-selected pool of believers outside the official system of civic cults, did spread far and wide. In particular, the cult of Isis—an old acquaintance from pre-imperial times—was attended to by a specialized, dedicated priesthood that might have had a vested interest in active missionizing. Yet, contrary to earlier claims, her cult does not seem to have attracted many new recruits, but rather to have diffused mainly through travel and resettlement of slaves or ex-slaves and their descendants (MacMullen 1981, 114–117). Conscious, organized evangelizing of any sort was basically unknown in the empire; if a cult acquired new adherents, ordinarily initiative lay with the unconverted, often influenced by the endorsement of people in high positions (ibid., 97–99, 111–112).

By contrast, the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus and Mithras started from scratch at the beginning of the second century CE and, as we have seen in the last section, achieved a remarkable increase in membership over the following two centuries, especially in the army camps and frontier towns in the west; so their growth must have occurred through conversion, even if of the "passive" kind. Their membership seems to have consisted mainly of soldiers and officers, as well as slaves and ex-slaves—so definitely not the social elite—and to have been restricted to men. The cult of Mithras in particular, on which we have substantially more information from archeology and epigraphy, was a remarkable success story given that it had no launching pad, no ancestral home to lend it authority and prestige. It was organized as an elaborate hierarchy of seven grades of initiation, and hence of leadership, through which members ascended, supposedly gaining access to some esoteric knowledge such as that concerning the immortality of the soul. This mirrored the hierarchy that soldiers and freedmen were experiencing in their secular lives. Members gathered in elaborately designed subterranean chapels, or Mithraea, where they enjoyed communal meals and worship. So Mithraism seems to be the closest thing in the ancient world to the modern sense of a congregational religion—one that can properly be said to have members, not customers, and where members derive satisfaction from participation in (material and spiritual) collective activities, solidarity and mutual support. So this

may be the first example of a group to which the economic model of the religious sect as a club (Iannaccone 1992) might apply. Yet it was not a religious "movement" in the sense that individual Mithraic groups and temples seem not to have been part of any organized network or coordinating structure.

Even more important, the elective cults, including Mithras', were not exclusive (Beard, North and Price 1998, 278–309; MacMullen 1981, 92–93; Lane Fox 1988, 34–36): they did not promote or demand exclusive allegiance to their god and disownment of all other deities. Their temples housed statues, paintings, and inscriptions that acknowledged a variety of other gods, both traditional and Oriental, which were evidently accommodated as "friends" or guests or thought to be "the same" as the cult's chief deity. In short, even if their *theology* was monotheistic inasmuch as their gods claimed universal jurisdiction over human concerns, their cult *practices* and behavioral requirements were not monotheistic. Furthermore, not only the gods worshiped in these cults, but also their priests were not exclusive: they (or their followers) could concurrently hold priesthoods of another cult or of a traditional god (MacMullen 1981, 92–93; Lane Fox 1988, 34–36). So the elective cults were no solution to the problem of the inflation of the pantheon. The true monotheists, Jews and Christians, were in a class apart, even though the Christians had to wage a protracted struggle up until the fourth century, redefining and sharpening their theology in the process, to differentiate themselves from this seemingly monotheistic competition (Ferrero 2008).

5.3.3 The End

Our discussion so far has highlighted the great, unique strength of Greco-Roman paganism, often noted by scholars: its seemingly unlimited capacity to accommodate new and foreign cults of every description, which would be lined up alongside the others for the believers to worship as they pleased. Unlimited religious tolerance was the hallmark of the system. (We will see in Sect. 6.1 a similar capacity for accommodation of diversity and assimilation of newcomers in the formation and evolution of Hinduism, one, however, taken to very different effect.) Some cults might in time decline and die out while others might rise and spread, following worshippers' demand and/or the elite's patronage, but if one turned to a new cult there was no requirement that one should forsake or forswear previous allegiances. So as Nock (1933) put it long ago, the very notion of "conversion", i.e., subscribing to a new cult to the exclusion of all others, had no meaning in this world—until the advent of Christianity, which changed everything.

The downside to unlimited accommodation was, however, that in the course of time the divine mix available to supplicants in any one place widened. We should be wary of inferring from this that the decision problem of the average person or city grew in direct proportion to the number of names of gods that were being marketed: first, because many "new" names were epithets, or personifications, of the same god, and secondly, because of the practice of "polyonymy", i.e. the fastening of many

divine names onto one and the same deity in inscriptions, like Zeus-Helios-Serapis or Isis-Aphrodite-Persephone, as if to signify that the deity under three different names was really one (MacMullen 1981, 90–91). Even so, the long-term increase in divine variety undoubtedly increased the areas of jurisdictional overlap and the range of deities that would overlap on the same issue space. As a consequence, hedging against risk by making offerings to multiple gods on each issue (in the economist's language, portfolio diversification) was more than ever a ubiquitous problem, and one steadily worsening with the multiplication of available gods and cults. This suggests that any process that would shrink the number and range of competing claimants for offerings would have benefited supplicants. In theory, this situation should have heightened the competitive pressure and hence the incentive for some of the cults to aggressively displace or take over their competitors, thereby shrinking the available range and moving the system toward increasing concentration, if not unification.

Yet, that did not happen. Paganism continued to evolve and change and accommodate variety and mixture to its very end, without showing signs of decline, crisis, or concentration and reduction of its diversity. Importantly, some philosophers' criticisms notwithstanding, animal sacrifice remained central to pagan cult to its very end (Lane Fox 1988, 70–72). This has been taken as testimony to the vitality of paganism; yet at the same time "[t]he sum was confusion. No counterforce for order existed" (MacMullen 1981, 102). But when the empire got past the crisis of the third century, the Tetrarchy, and the Great Persecution of Christians, what emerged triumphant was Christianity, not the traditional civic religion nor Isis nor Mithras—that is, the one religion that had been unswervingly exclusive in its monotheism (unlike the elective cults), had a proselytizing disposition toward the whole world (unlike post-Destruction Judaism, i.e. the Judaism that took shape after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE), and was run by a professional, full-time, exclusive clergy (unlike traditional Greco-Roman paganism).

The story of the rise and triumph of Christianity, and the reasons for its success, are topics that fall outside the scope of this book. But its consequences are clear (Beard, North and Price 1998, Chap. 8; MacMullen 1984). After Emperor Constantine's endorsement of Christianity in 313 CE, and even after Emperor Theodosius' proclamation of Christianity as the state religion in the 390 s and his disestablishment of the traditional cults, most of the elite across the empire unobtrusively continued their pagan observances well into the fifth century, slowly converting to the new faith as the prospect of taking up the new priestly offices to replace the old ones became attractive. The masses of non-elite, and especially non-urban people were slowly brought into line by a varying mixture of persecution and accommodation of their pagan practices, in a struggle that dragged on well into the eight century and beyond (MacMullen 1997). The elective cults too went under, and that must have been a harder blow to their devotees; but there is no evidence that the cult of Mithras survived beyond the fourth century or outside the empire. So there were frictions and protests and occasionally bloodshed at different points in time and space, but nothing like an organized resistance to the Christian takeover. And despite Emperor Julian's (reigned 361–363 CE) short-lived, top-down attempt to restore the traditional religion, there was nothing like a last redoubt where the diehard of paganism would hold

out forever and faithfully await for the time to be ripe for a comeback. Slowly and unevenly, paganism died out and that was the end of it.

Why did the religious suppliers of the empire, traditional or otherwise, not organize a response to the problems and confusion of the pagan system, and instead laid themselves open to the Christian onslaught? Our description of the priestly organization suggests the answer. With few, scattered exceptions, priests were not full-time, dedicated professionals; hence they had no corporate identity as a priestly class and did not function as an interest group. They did not make a living out of it, often took up different priestly offices in the course of their life and even at the same time, and normally priesthood was joined with propertied class status and with political or military office to make up a lifetime career in the Roman senatorial class or in the provincial elite. The priests, or the highest initiation grades, of the elective cults were more dedicated and invested in their roles, but they too were not exclusive. The only full-time, exclusive, professional priestly class was the Christian clergy—and indeed they showed they could be a very effective pressure group in the Christian empire. In a nutshell, no one in late paganism seems to have had the material incentives—in the traditional religion—or the foresight and entrepreneurial ability—in the elective cults—that would have been required to try and turn around the confusion and disorder of the polytheistic system. Therefore the Christians' rise was unopposed—it was met with bouts of persecution from the state but not with a constructive response, private or public, to their challenge.

So when the official Christianization of the empire began, everyone sought to adjust as best they could, offering various degrees of resistance; but there was no group that could even think of standing up to the new masters—admittedly, a formidable combination of imperial power and church authority—*in their capacity as a priestly class or a grassroots religious association.* The organization of Greek and Roman polytheism had so effectively disempowered religion and subordinated it to political power and class status that any capacity of religious agents to take on a life of their own was stymied at the roots. They would and could only swim or sink with the political system in which they were embedded; when the old order collapsed, they were doomed. Despite signs of economic stress among the upper classes that had always borne the brunt of the expensive public structure of temples and ceremonies (MacMullen 1981, 128–130), ancient paganism as a religious system was alive and well when Constantine made the great turnaround, and were it not for that, it could well have continued indefinitely; but once it started to wither, it was soon beyond recovery. In a sense, there was no one in charge of the "system"—no one that could or would heal its wounds when it was still possible, then provide for a proper burial, and finally, if need be, work toward a future resurrection. So it was that the elite made a relatively smooth transfer from a priest of Jupiter to a bishop of Christ when the state required it.

5.4 Main Takeaways

While we have no reliable information about the passing of Celtic religion, the Germanic tribes that settled in the lands of the Western Roman Empire soon converted to Christianity following a top-down model: the missionaries converted the king and his court, and then the rest of the people would follow—the opposite of the bottom-up process that had marked the rise of Christianity in the empire. The Franks and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Britain followed this model and conversion entailed little popular resistance. In the Scandinavian countries the process entailed more conflict and occasional violence, until all of them had come around by the end of the eleventh century when Christian kings managed to impose their will. In Iceland, a colony of free farmers without a king, the conversion decision was taken by the general assembly.

The kings' chief incentive to convert was the expectation of victory in war or expansion of royal power, as seen earlier with Constantine. For the rest of the people, two factors played a key role. One was the prospect of an afterlife available to everyone, and not just to a warrior aristocracy. Another was the shift of belief that led men outside the aristocracy to think of "their" god of choice (usually Thor or Freyr and Freyja) as a personal friend and protector in their quest for security and material welfare; so they found a new god—Christ—who bested the old gods on their own ground. This transition was facilitated by the near-absence of a professional priesthood interested in defending the old religion and able to offer an organized resistance to the new one.

In the Roman Empire, Greco-Roman religion continued unchanged to the end, with ever-growing multiplicity of gods as they traveled freely within the empire and often overlaid and assimilated old local gods, as in Gaul. Some so-called Oriental or elective cults enjoyed remarkable success. They were based on a self-selected membership, served by a dedicated priesthood, and often devoted to a god with universal jurisdiction (especially Mithras); however, neither their gods nor their priesthoods were exclusive, so they never mounted a challenge to the civic religion nor did they offer a solution to the inflation of the pantheon.

Paganism went to its death without showing signs of crisis or of concentration of its pantheon, despite the growing confusion and inefficiency. Reform did not take place because the traditional non-professional, part-time priests had no corporate identity as a priestly class and did not function as an interest group, so they had neither the incentive nor the means to prevent or resist the Christian takeover. In due time, the elite switched assignment from a priest of Jupiter to a bishop of Christ.