



The Athens Greek Religion Seminar, Tuesday May 22 2018

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***When Christians Had Come into the World, the Universe Went to Ruin'. -
'Come on! Christians Do Not Differ From Other People!***

ABSTRACT

Participating in public religious ceremonies in honour of the gods, attending theatrical and athletic shows at the amphitheatre and the arena and frequenting the baths, constituted essential features of Roman civic life. It will be the purpose of my paper to explore the extent to which early Christians, prior to emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, disrupted civic life by rejecting its values and distancing themselves from the customs and habits of their pagan contemporaries. The standard view of modern scholarship is that the early Christians felt a real and deep aversion for the world around them, regarding it far too immoral and far too closely associated with demons for their own taste, and stubbornly refused to participate in religious ceremonies, attend the shows and visit the baths. My aim will be to challenge this traditional view and show that Christians, in general, were not anti-social and that their lifestyle was not as distinct as is usually imagined and proposed.

The shows and baths occupied a central position in the social life of a Roman citizen. A systematic Christian absence from them didn't usually arouse feelings of hostility or fear for the future but did cause wonder and distrust, especially if the absentee belonged to the upper classes or was an official, since the shows and baths were immensely popular and emblematic of *Romanitas*. Unwillingness to participate in the traditional religious ceremonies was considered as alarming for the common safety and interpreted as an act of impiety towards the gods, disapproval of the status quo and disobedience to the political authorities. The Romans had committed themselves to a contractual arrangement with their gods. The particular agreement was of a reciprocal nature; it involved each party in giving and in return receiving services. The Romans performed rituals in honour of their gods in order to affirm and renew their relationship with them. The rituals attracted the attention of the gods, appeased them and secured the maintenance of the established order, military victories, prosperity and other considerable benefits. Human negligence and failure to respect the man's part of the agreement was thought to endanger the relationship with the gods and to prompt divine vengeance. Natural disasters were seen as manifestations of divine anger or dismay.