

ORIENTAL RELIGIONS  
IN  
ROMAN PAGANISM



# The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism

By  
Franz Cumont

With an Introductory Essay by  
Grant Showerman

Authorized Translation

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Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism

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**TO MY TEACHER AND FRIEND**  
**CHARLES MICHEL**



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## INTRODUCTION.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FRANZ CUMONT'S WORK.

FRANZ CUMONT, born January 3, 1868, and educated at Ghent, Bonn, Berlin, and Paris, resides in Brussels, and has been Professor in the University of Ghent since 1892. His monumental work, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, published in 1896 and 1899 in two volumes, was followed in 1902 by the separate publication, under the title *Les Mystères de Mithra*, of the second half of Vol. I, the *Conclusions* in which he interpreted the great mass of evidence contained in the remainder of the work. The year following, this book appeared in the translation of Thomas J. McCormack as *The Mysteries of Mithra*, published by the Open Court Publishing Company. M. Cumont's other work of prime interest to students of the ancient faiths, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, appeared in 1906, was revised and issued in a second edition in 1909, and is now presented in English in the following pages.

M. Cumont is an ideal contributor to knowledge in his chosen field. As an investigator, he combines in one person Teutonic thoroughness and Gallic intuition. As a writer, his virtues are no less pronounced. Recognition of his mastery of an enormous array of detailed learning followed immediately on the publication

of *Textes et monuments*, and the present series of essays, besides a numerous series of articles and monographs, makes manifest the same painstaking and thorough scholarship; but he is something more than the mere *savant* who has at command a vast and difficult body of knowledge. He is also the literary architect who builds up his material into well-ordered and graceful structure.

Above all, M. Cumont is an interpreter. In *The Mysteries of Mithra* he put into circulation, so to speak, the coin of the ideas he had minted in the patient and careful study of *Textes et Monuments*; and in the studies of *The Oriental Religions* he is giving to the wider public the interpretation of the larger and more comprehensive body of knowledge of which his acquaintance with the religion of Mithra is only a part, and against which as a background it stands. What his book *The Mysteries of Mithra* is to his special knowledge of Mithraism, *The Oriental Religions* is to his knowledge of the whole field. He is thus an example of the highest type of scholar—the exhaustive searcher after evidence, and the sympathetic interpreter who mediates between his subject and the lay intellectual life of his time.

And yet, admirable as is M. Cumont's presentation in *The Mysteries of Mithra* and *The Oriental Religions*, nothing is a greater mistake than to suppose that his popularizations are facile reading. The few specialists in ancient religions may indeed sail smoothly in the current of his thought; but the very nature of a subject which ramifies so extensively and so intricately into the whole of ancient life, concerning itself with practically all the manifestations of ancient civilization—

philosophy, religion, astrology, magic, mythology, literature, art, war, commerce, government—will of necessity afford some obstacle to readers unfamiliar with the study of religion.

It is in the hope of lessening somewhat this natural difficulty of assimilating M. Cumont's contribution to knowledge, and above all, to life, that these brief words of introduction are undertaken. The presentation in outline of the main lines of thought which underlie his conception of the importance of the Oriental religions in universal history may afford the uninitiated reader a background against which the author's depiction of the various cults of the Oriental group will be more easily and clearly seen.

M. Cumont's work, then, transports us in imagination to a time when Christianity was still—at least in the eyes of Roman pagans—only one of a numerous array of foreign Eastern religions struggling for recognition in the Roman world, and especially in the city of Rome. To understand the conditions under which the new faith finally triumphed, we should first realize the number of these religions, and the apparently chaotic condition of paganism when viewed as a system.

"Let us suppose," says M. Cumont, "that in modern Europe the faithful had deserted the Christian churches to worship Allah or Brahma, to follow the precepts of Confucius or Buddha, or to adopt the maxims of the Shinto; let us imagine a great confusion of all the races of the world in which Arabian mullahs, Chinese scholars, Japanese bonzes, Tibetan lamas and Hindu pundits should all be preaching fatalism and predesti-

nation, ancestor-worship and devotion to a deified sovereign, pessimism and deliverance through annihilation—a confusion in which all those priests should erect temples of exotic architecture in our cities and celebrate their disparate rites therein. Such a dream, which the future may perhaps realize, would offer a pretty accurate picture of the religious chaos in which the ancient world was struggling before the reign of Constantine.”

But it is no less necessary to realize, in the second place, that, had there not been an essential solidarity of all these different faiths, the triumph of Christianity would have been achieved with much less difficulty and in much less time. We are not to suppose that religions are long-lived and tenacious unless they possess something vital which enables them to resist. In his chapter on “The Transformation of Roman Paganism,” M. Cumont thus accounts for the vitality of the old faiths: “The mass of religions at Rome finally became so impregnated by neo-Platonism and Orientalism that paganism may be called a single religion with a fairly distinct theology, whose doctrines were somewhat as follows: adoration of the elements, especially the cosmic bodies; the reign of one God, eternal and omnipotent, with messenger attendants; spiritual interpretation of the gross rites yet surviving from primitive times; assurance of eternal felicity to the faithful; belief that the soul was on earth to be proved before its final return to the universal spirit, of which it was a spark; the existence of an abysmal abode for the evil, against whom the faithful must keep up an unceasing struggle; the destruction of the universe,

the death of the wicked, and the eternal happiness of the good in a reconstructed world.”\*

If this formulation of pagan doctrine surprises those who have been told that paganism was “a fashion rather than a faith,” and are accustomed to think of it in terms of Jupiter and Juno, Venus and Mars, and the other empty, cold, and formalized deities that have so long filled literature and art, it will be because they have failed to take into account that between Augustus and Constantine three hundred years elapsed, and are unfamiliar with the very natural fact that during all that long period the character of paganism was gradually undergoing change and growth. “The faith of the friends of Symmachus,” M. Cumont tells us, “was much farther removed from the religious ideal of Augustus, although they would never have admitted it, than that of their opponents in the senate.”

To what was due this change in the content of the pagan ideal, so great that the phraseology in which the ideal is described puts us in mind of Christian doctrine itself? First, answers M. Cumont, to neo-Platonism, which attempted the reconciliation of the antiquated religions with the advanced moral and intellectual ideas of its own time by spiritual interpretation of outgrown cult stories and cult practices. A second and more vital cause, however, wrought to bring about the same result. This was the invasion of the Oriental religions, and the slow working, from the advent of the Great Mother of the Gods in B. C. 204 to the downfall of paganism at the end of the fourth cen-

\* This summary of M. Cumont's chapter is quoted from my review of the first edition of *Les religions orientales* in *Classical Philology*, III, 4, p. 467.

ture of the Christian era, of the leaven of Oriental sentiment. The cults of Asia and Egypt bridged the gap between the old religions and Christianity, and in such a way as to make the triumph of Christianity an evolution, not a revolution. The Great Mother and Attis, with self-consecration, enthusiasm, and asceticism; Isis and Serapis, with the ideals of communion and purification; Baal, the omnipotent dweller in the far-off heavens; Jehovah, the jealous God of the Hebrews, omniscient and omnipresent; Mithra, deity of the sun, with the Persian dualism of good and evil, and with after-death rewards and punishments—all these, and more, flowed successively into the channel of Roman life and mingled their waters to form the late Roman paganism which proved so pertinacious a foe to the Christian religion. The influence that underlay their pretensions was so real that there is some warrant for the view of Renan that at one time it was doubtful whether the current as it flowed away into the Dark Ages should be Mithraic or Christian.

The vitalization of the evidence regarding these cults is M. Cumont's great contribution. His perseverance in the accurate collection of material is equalled only by his power to see the real nature and effect of the religions of which he writes. Assuming that no religion can succeed merely because of externals, but must stand on some foundation of moral excellence, he shows how the pagan faiths were able to hold their own, and even to contest the ground with Christianity. These religions, he asserts, gave greater satisfaction first, to the senses and passions, secondly, to the intelligence, finally, and above all, to the conscience. "The spread of the Oriental religions"—again I quote

a summary from *Classical Philology* — “was due to merit. In contrast to the cold and formal religions of Rome, the Oriental faiths, with their hoary traditions and basis of science and culture, their fine ceremonial, the excitement attendant on their mysteries, their deities with hearts of compassion, their cultivation of the social bond, their appeal to conscience and their promises of purification and reward in a future life, were personal rather than civic, and satisfied the individual soul. . . . With such a conception of latter-day paganism, we may more easily understand its strength and the bitter rivalry between it and the new faith, as well as the facility with which pagan society, once its cause was proved hopeless, turned to Christianity.” The Oriental religions had made straight the way. Christianity triumphed after long conflict because its antagonists also were not without weapons from the armory of God. Both parties to the struggle had their loins girt about with truth, and both wielded the sword of the spirit; but the steel of the Christian was the more piercing, the breastplate of his righteousness was the stronger, and his feet were better shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.

Nor did Christianity stop there. It took from its opponents their own weapons, and used them; the better elements of paganism were transferred to the new religion. “As the religious history of the empire is studied more closely,” writes M. Cumont, “the triumph of the church will, in our opinion, appear more and more as the culmination of a long evolution of beliefs. We can understand the Christianity of the fifth century with its greatness and weaknesses, its spiritual exaltation and its puerile superstitions, if we

know the moral antecedents of the world in which it developed ”

M. Cumont is therefore a contributor to our appreciation of the continuity of history. Christianity was not a sudden and miraculous transformation, but a composite of slow and laborious growth. Its four centuries of struggle were not a struggle against an entirely unworthy religion, else would our faith in its divine warrant be diminished; it is to its own great credit, and also to the credit of the opponents that succumbed to it, that it finally overwhelmed them. To quote Emil Aust: “Christianity did not wake into being the religious sense, but it afforded that sense the fullest opportunity of being satisfied; and paganism fell because the less perfect must give place to the more perfect, not because it was sunken in sin and vice. It had out of its own strength laid out the ways by which it advanced to lose itself in the arms of Christianity, and to recognize this does not mean to minimize the significance of Christianity. We are under no necessity of artificially darkening the heathen world; the light of the Evangel streams into it brightly enough without this.”\*

Finally, the work of M. Cumont and others in the field of the ancient Oriental religions is not an isolated activity, but part of a larger intellectual movement. Their effort is only one manifestation of the interest of recent years in the study of universal religion; other manifestations of the same interest are to be seen in the histories of the Greek and Roman religions by

\* *Die Religion der Römer*, p. 116. For the significance of the pagan faiths, see an essay on “The Ancient Religions in Universal History,” *American Journal of Philology*, XXIX, 2, pp. 156-171.



Gruppe, Farnell, and Wissowa, in the anthropological labors of Tylor, Lang, and Frazer, in the publication of Reinach's *Orpheus*, in the study of comparative religion, and in such a phenomenon as a World's Parliament of Religions.

In a word, M. Cumont and his companion ancient Orientalists are but one brigade engaged in the modern campaign for the liberation of religious thought. His studies are therefore not concerned alone with paganism, nor alone with the religions of the ancient past; in common with the labors of students of modern religion, they touch our own faith and our own times, and are in vital relation with our philosophy of living, and consequently with our highest welfare. "To us moderns," says Professor Frazer in the preface to his *Golden Bough*, "a still wider vista is vouchsafed, a greater panorama is unrolled by the study which aims at bringing home to us the faith and the practice, the hopes and the ideals, not of two highly gifted races only, but of all mankind, and thus at enabling us to follow the long march, the slow and toilsome ascent, of humanity from savagery to civilization. . . . But the comparative study of the beliefs and institutions of mankind is fitted to be much more than a means of satisfying an enlightened curiosity and of furnishing materials for the researches of the learned. Well handled, it may become a powerful instrument to expedite progress. . . ."

It is possible that all this might disquiet the minds of those who have been wont to assume perfection in the primitive Christian church, and who assume also that present-day Christianity is the ultimate form of the Christian religion. Such persons—if there are

such—should rather take heart from the whole-souled devotion to truth everywhere to be seen in the works of scholars in ancient religion, and from their equally evident sympathy with all manifestations of human effort to establish the divine relation ; but most of all from their universal testimony that for all time and in all places and under all conditions the human heart has felt powerfully the need of the divine relation. From the knowledge that the desire to get right with God—the common and essential element in all religions—has been the most universal and the most potent and persistent factor in past history, it is not far to the conviction that it will always continue to be so, and that the struggle toward the divine light of religion pure and undefiled will never perish from the earth.

GRANT SHOWERMAN.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN.

## PREFACE.

**I**N November, 1905, the Collège de France honored the writer by asking him to succeed M. Naville in opening the series of lectures instituted by the Michonis foundation. A few months later the "Hibbert Trust" invited him to Oxford to develop certain subjects which he had touched upon at Paris. In this volume have been collected the contents of both series with the addition of a short bibliography and notes intended for scholars desirous of verifying assertions made in the text.<sup>1</sup> The form of the work has scarcely been changed, but we trust that these pages, intended though they were for oral delivery, will bear reading, and that the title of these studies will not seem too ambitious for what they have to offer. The propagation of the Oriental religions, with the development of neo-Platonism, is the leading fact in the moral history of the pagan empire. May this small volume on a great subject throw at least some light upon this truth, and may the reader receive these essays with the same kind interest shown by the audiences at Paris and Oxford.

The reader will please remember that the different chapters were thought out and written as lectures. They do not claim to contain a debit and credit account of what the Latin paganism borrowed from or loaned to the Orient. Certain well-known facts have been de-

liberately passed over in order to make room for others that are perhaps less known. We have taken liberties with our subject matter that would not be tolerated in a didactic treatise, but to which surely no one will object.

We are more likely to be reproached for an apparently serious omission. We have investigated only the internal development of paganism in the Latin world, and have considered its relation to Christianity only incidentally and by the way. The question is nevertheless important and has been the subject of celebrated lectures as well as of learned monographs and widely distributed manuals.<sup>2</sup> We wish to slight neither the interest nor the importance of that controversy, and it is not because it seemed negligible that we have not entered into it.

By reason of their intellectual bent and education the theologians were for a long time more inclined to consider the continuity of the Jewish tradition than the causes that disturbed it; but a reaction has taken place, and to-day they endeavor to show that the church has borrowed considerably from the conceptions and ritualistic ceremonies of the pagan mysteries. In spite of the prestige that surrounded Eleusis, the word "mysteries" calls up Hellenized Asia rather than Greece proper, because in the first place the earliest Christian communities were founded, formed and developed in the heart of Oriental populations, Semites, Phrygians and Egyptians. Moreover the religions of those people were much farther advanced, much richer in ideas and sentiments, more striking and stirring than the Greco-Latin anthropomorphism. Their liturgy always derives its inspiration from generally accepted beliefs

about purification embodied in certain acts regarded as sanctifying. These facts were almost identical in the various sects. The new faith poured its revelation into the hallowed moulds of earlier religions because in that form alone could the world in which it developed receive its message.

This is approximately the point of view adopted by the latest historians.

But, however absorbing this important problem may be, we could not think of going into it, even briefly, in these studies on Roman paganism. In the Latin world the question assumes much more modest proportions, and its aspect changes completely. Here Christianity spread only after it had outgrown the embryonic state and really became established. Moreover like Christianity the Oriental mysteries at Rome remained for a long time chiefly the religion of a foreign minority. Did any exchange take place between these rival sects? The silence of the ecclesiastical writers is not sufficient reason for denying it. We dislike to acknowledge a debt to our adversaries, because it means that we recognize some value in the cause they defend, but I believe that the importance of these exchanges should not be exaggerated. Without a doubt certain ceremonies and holidays of the church were based on pagan models. In the fourth century Christmas was placed on the 25th of December because on that date was celebrated the birth of the sun (*Natalis Invicti*) who was born to a new life each year after the solstice.<sup>3</sup> Certain vestiges of the religions of Isis and Cybele besides other polytheistic practices perpetuated themselves in the adoration of local saints. On the other hand as soon as Christianity became a moral power in

the world, it imposed itself even on its enemies. The Phrygian priests of the Great Mother openly opposed their celebration of the vernal equinox to the Christian Easter, and attributed to the blood shed in the taurobolium the redemptive power of the blood of the divine Lamb.<sup>4</sup>

All these facts constitute a series of very delicate problems of chronology and interrelation, and it would be rash to attempt to solve them *en bloc*. Probably there is a different answer in each particular case, and I am afraid that some cases must always remain unsolved. We may speak of "vespers of Isis" or of a "eucharist of Mithra and his companions," but only in the same sense as when we say "the vassal princes of the empire" or "Diocletian's socialism." These are tricks of style used to give prominence to a similarity and to establish a parallel strongly and closely. A word is not a demonstration, and we must be careful not to infer an influence from an analogy. Preconceived notions are always the most serious obstacles to an exact knowledge of the past. Some modern writers, like the ancient Church Fathers, are fain to see a sacrilegious parody inspired by the spirit of lies in the resemblance between the mysteries and the church ceremonies. Other historians seem disposed to agree with the Oriental priests, who claimed priority for their cults at Rome, and saw a plagiarism of their ancient rituals in the Christian ceremonies. It would appear that both are very much mistaken. Resemblance does not necessarily presuppose imitation, and frequently a similarity of ideas and practices must be explained by common origin, exclusive of any borrowing.

An illustration will make my thought clearer. The votaries of Mithra likened the practice of their religion to military service. When the neophyte joined he was compelled to take an oath (*sacramentum*) similar to the one required of recruits in the army, and there is no doubt that an indelible mark was likewise branded on his body with a hot iron. The third degree of the mystical hierarchy was that of "soldier" (*miles*). Thenceforward the initiate belonged to the sacred militia of the invincible god and fought the powers of evil under his orders. All these ideas and institutions are so much in accord with what we know of Mazdean dualism, in which the entire life was conceived as a struggle against the malevolent spirits; they are so inseparable from the history even of Mithraism, which always was a soldiers' religion, that we cannot doubt they belonged to it before its appearance in the Occident.

On the other hand, we find similar conceptions in Christianity. The society of the faithful—the term is still in use—is the "Church Militant." During the first centuries the comparison of the church with an army was carried out even in details;<sup>5</sup> the baptism of the neophyte was the oath of fidelity to the flag taken by the recruits. Christ was the "emperor," the commander-in-chief, of his disciples, who formed cohorts triumphing under his command over the demons; the apostates were deserters; the sanctuaries, camps; the pious practices, drills and sentry-duty, and so on.

If we consider that the gospel preached peace, that for a long time the Christians felt a repugnance to military service, where their faith was threatened, we are tempted to admit *a priori* an influence of the belligerent cult of Mithra upon Christian thought.

But this is not the case. The theme of the *militia Christi* appears in the oldest ecclesiastical authors, in the epistles of St. Clement and even in those of St. Paul. It is impossible to admit an imitation of the Mithraic mysteries then, because at that period they had no importance whatever.

But if we extend our researches to the history of that notion, we shall find that, at least under the empire, the mystics of Isis were also regarded as forming sacred cohorts enlisted in the service of the goddess, that previously in the Stoic philosophy human existence was frequently likened to a campaign, and that even the astrologers called the man who submitted to destiny and renounced all revolt a "soldier of fate."<sup>6</sup>

This conception of life, especially of religious life, was therefore very popular from the beginning of our era. It was manifestly prior both to Christianity and to Mithraism. It developed in the military monarchies of the Asiatic Diadochi. Here the soldier was no longer a citizen defending his country, but in most instances a volunteer bound by a sacred vow to the person of his king. In the martial states that fought for the heritage of the Achemenides this personal devotion dominated or displaced all national feeling. We know the oaths taken by those subjects to their deified kings.<sup>7</sup> They agreed to defend and uphold them even at the cost of their own lives, and always to have the same friends and the same enemies as they; they dedicated to them not only their actions and words, but their very thoughts. Their duty was a complete abandonment of their personality in favor of those monarchs who were held the equals of the gods. The sacred *militia* of the mysteries was nothing but this civic



morality viewed from the religious standpoint. It con-founded loyalty with piety.

As we see, the researches into the doctrines or practices common to Christianity and the Oriental mysteries lead almost always beyond the limits of the Roman empire into the Hellenistic Orient. The religious conceptions which imposed themselves on Latin Europe under the Cæsars<sup>8</sup> were developed there, and it is there we must look for the key to enigmas still unsolved. It is true that at present nothing is more obscure than the history of the religions that arose in Asia when Greek culture came in contact with barbarian theology. It is rarely possible to formulate satisfactory conclusions with any degree of certainty, and before further discoveries are made we shall frequently be compelled to weigh contrasting probabilities. We must frequently throw out the sounding line into the shifting sea of possibility in order to find secure anchorage. But at any rate we perceive with sufficient distinctness the direction in which the investigations must be pursued.

It is our belief that the main point to be cleared up is the composite religion of those Jewish or Jewish-pagan communities, the worshipers of Hypsistos, the Sabbatists, the Sabaziasts and others in which the new creed took root during the apostolic age. In those communities the Mosaic law had become adapted to the sacred usages of the Gentiles even before the beginning of our era, and monotheism had made concessions to idolatry. Many beliefs of the ancient Orient, as for instance the ideas of Persian dualism regarding the infernal world, arrived in Europe by two roads, the more or less orthodox Judaism of the communities of

the dispersion in which the gospel was accepted immediately, and the pagan mysteries imported from Syria or Asia Minor. Certain similarities that surprised and shocked the apologists will cease to look strange as soon as we reach the distant sources of the channels that reunited at Rome.

But these delicate and complicated researches into origins and relationships belong especially to the history of the Alexandrian period. In considering the Roman empire, the principal fact is that the Oriental religions propagated doctrines, previous to and later side by side with Christianity, that acquired with it universal authority at the decline of the ancient world. The preaching of the Asiatic priests also unwittingly prepared for the triumph of the church which put its stamp on the work at which they had unconsciously labored.

Through their popular propaganda they had completely disintegrated the ancient national faith of the Romans, while at the same time the Cæsars had gradually destroyed the political particularism. After their advent it was no longer necessary for religion to be connected with a state in order to become universal. Religion was no longer regarded as a public duty, but as a personal obligation; no longer did it subordinate the individual to the city-state, but pretended above all to assure his welfare in this world and especially in the world to come. The Oriental mysteries offered their votaries radiant perspectives of eternal happiness. Thus the focus of morality was changed. The aim became to realize the sovereign good in the life hereafter instead of in this world, as the Greek philosophy had done. No longer did man act in view of tangible real-

ities, but to attain ideal hopes. Existence in this life was regarded as a preparation for a sanctified life, as a trial whose outcome was to be either everlasting happiness or everlasting pain.

As we see, the entire system of ethical values was overturned.

The salvation of the soul, which had become the one great human care, was especially promised in these mysteries upon the accurate performance of the sacred ceremonies. The rites possessed a power of purification and redemption. They made man better and freed him from the dominion of hostile spirits. Consequently, religion was a singularly important and absorbing matter, and the liturgy could be performed only by a clergy devoting itself entirely to the task. The Asiatic gods exacted undivided service; their priests were no longer magistrates, scarcely citizens. They devoted themselves unreservedly to their ministry, and demanded of their adherents submission to their sacred authority.

All these features that we are but sketching here, gave the Oriental religions a resemblance to Christianity, and the reader of these studies will find many more points in common among them. These analogies are even more striking to us than they were in those times because we have become acquainted in India and China with religions very different from the Roman paganism and from Christianity as well, and because the relationships of the two latter strike us more strongly on account of the contrast. These theological similarities did not attract the attention of the ancients, because they scarcely conceived of the existence of other possibilities, while differences were what they

remarked especially. I am not at all forgetting how considerable these were. The principal divergence was that Christianity, by placing God in an ideal sphere beyond the confines of this world, endeavored to rid itself of every attachment to a frequently abject polytheism. But even if we oppose tradition, we cannot break with the past that has formed us, nor separate ourselves from the present in which we live. As the religious history of the empire is studied more closely, the triumph of the church will, in our opinion, appear more and more as the culmination of a long evolution of beliefs. We can understand the Christianity of the fifth century with its greatness and weaknesses, its spiritual exaltation and its puerile superstitions, if we know the moral antecedents of the world in which it developed. The faith of the friends of Symmachus was much farther removed from the religious ideal of Augustus, although they would never have admitted it, than that of their opponents in the senate. I hope that these studies will succeed in showing how the pagan religions from the Orient aided the long continued effort of Roman society, contented for many centuries with a rather insipid idolatry, toward more elevated and more profound forms of worship. Possibly their credulous mysticism deserves as much blame as is laid upon the theurgy of neo-Platonism, which drew from the same sources of inspiration, but like neo-Platonism it has strengthened man's feeling of eminent dignity by asserting the divine nature of the soul. By making inner purity the main object of earthly existence, they refined and exalted the psychic life and gave it an almost supernatural intensity, which until then was unknown in the ancient world.

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION.

**I**N this second edition the eight lectures forming the reading matter of this book have suffered scarcely any change, and, excepting the chapter on Syria, the additions are insignificant. It would have been an easy matter to expand them, but I did not want these lectures to become erudite dissertations, nor the ideas which are the essential part of a sketch like the present to be overwhelmed by a multiplicity of facts. In general I have therefore limited myself to weeding out certain errors that were overlooked, or introduced, in the proofreading.

The notes, however, have been radically revised. I have endeavored to give expression to the suggestions or observations communicated to me by obliging readers; to mention new publications and to utilize the results of my own studies. The index makes it easy to find the subjects discussed.

And here I must again thank my friend Charles Michel, who undertook the tedious task of rereading the proofs of this book, and whose scrupulous and sagacious care has saved me from many and many a blunder.

F. C.

PARIS, FRANCE, February, 1909.



## ROME AND THE ORIENT.

WE are fond of regarding ourselves as the heirs of Rome, and we like to think that the Latin genius, after having absorbed the genius of Greece, held an intellectual and moral supremacy in the ancient world similar to the one Europe now maintains, and that the culture of the peoples that lived under the authority of the Cæsars was stamped forever by their strong touch. It is difficult to forget the present entirely and to renounce aristocratic pretensions. We find it hard to believe that the Orient has not always lived, to some extent, in the state of humiliation from which it is now slowly emerging, and we are inclined to ascribe to the ancient inhabitants of Smyrna, Beirut or Alexandria the faults with which the Levantines of to-day are being reproached. The growing influence of the Orientals that accompanied the decline of the empire has frequently been considered a morbid phenomenon and a symptom of the slow decomposition of the ancient world. Even Renan does not seem to have been sufficiently free from an old prejudice when he wrote on this subject: 'That the oldest and most worn out civilization should by its corruption subjugate the younger was inevitable.'

But if we calmly consider the real facts, avoiding the optical illusion that makes things in our immediate

vicinity look larger, we shall form a quite different opinion. It is beyond all dispute that Rome found the point of support of its military power in the Occident. The legions from the Danube and the Rhine were always braver, stronger and better disciplined than those from the Euphrates and the Nile. But it is in the Orient, especially in these countries of "old civilization," that we must look for industry and riches, for technical ability and artistic productions, as well as for intelligence and science, even before Constantine made it the center of political power.

While Greece merely vegetated in a state of poverty, humiliation and exhaustion; while Italy suffered depopulation and became unable to provide for her own support; while the other countries of Europe were hardly out of barbarism; Asia Minor, Egypt and Syria gathered the rich harvests Roman peace made possible. Their industrial centers cultivated and renewed all the traditions that had caused their former celebrity. A more intense intellectual life corresponded with the economic activity of these great manufacturing and exporting countries. They excelled in every profession except that of arms, and even the prejudiced Romans admitted their superiority. The menace of an Oriental empire haunted the imaginations of the first masters of the world. Such an empire seems to have been the main thought of the dictator Cæsar, and the triumvir Antony almost realized it. Even Nero thought of making Alexandria his capital. Although Rome, supported by her army and the right of might, retained the political authority for a long time, she bowed to the fatal moral ascendancy of more advanced peoples. Viewed from this standpoint the history of the empire



during the first three centuries may be summarized as a "peaceful infiltration" of the Orient into the Occident.<sup>2</sup> This truth has become evident since the various aspects of Roman civilization are being studied in greater detail; and before broaching the special subject of these studies we wish to review a few phases of the slow metamorphosis of which the propagation of the Oriental religions was one phenomenon.

In the first place the imitation of the Orient showed itself plainly in political institutions.<sup>3</sup> To be convinced of this fact it is sufficient to compare the government of the empire in the time of Augustus with what it had become under Diocletian. At the beginning of the imperial régime Rome ruled the world but did not govern it. She kept the number of her functionaries down to a minimum, her provinces were mere unorganized aggregates of cities where she only exercised police power, protectorates rather than annexed countries.<sup>4</sup> As long as law and order were maintained and her citizens, functionaries and merchants could transact their business, Rome was satisfied. She saved herself the trouble of looking after the public service by leaving broad authority to the cities that had existed before her domination, or had been modeled after her. The taxes were levied by syndicates of bankers and the public lands rented out. Before the reforms instituted by Augustus, even the army was not an organic and permanent force, but consisted theoretically of troops levied before a war and discharged after victory.

Rome's institutions remained those of a city. It was difficult to apply them to the vast territory she attempted to govern with their aid. They were a clumsy