

## **Pagan and Christian: The Appeal of Christianity E. R. Dodds**

*The beginnings of Christianity coincided with the establishment of the Empire under Augustus and the early emperors who succeeded him. Numerous attempts have been made to analyze Jesus and the rise of Christianity. In the following selection E. R. Dodds views early Christianity from a historical perspective. He focuses on the appeal of Christianity and how it compares with other religions of that period.*

**Consider:** *Typical traits of mystery religions and how Christianity differed from other mystery religions; other factors that might help explain the rise of Christianity in this early period.*

In the first place, its very exclusiveness, its refusal to concede any value to alternative forms of worship, which nowadays is often felt to be a weakness, was in the circumstances of the time a source of strength. The religious tolerance which was the normal Greek and Roman practice had resulted by accumulation in a bewildering mass of alternatives. There were too many cults, too many mysteries, too many philosophies of life to choose from: you could pile one religious insurance on another, yet not feel safe. Christianity made a clean sweep. It lifted the burden of freedom from the shoulders of the individual: one choice, one irrevocable choice, and the road to salvation was clear. . . . Secondly, Christianity was open to all. In principle, it made no social distinctions; it accepted the manual worker, the slave, the outcast, the ex-criminal; and though in the course of our period it developed a strong hierarchic structure, its hierarchy offered an open career to talent. Above all, it did not, like Neoplatonism, demand education . . . . Thirdly, in a period when earthly life was increasingly devalued and guilt-feelings were widely prevalent, Christianity held out to the disinherited the conditional promise of a better inheritance in another world. So did several of its pagan rivals. But Christianity wielded both a bigger stick and a juicier carrot. It was accused of being a religion of fear, and such it no doubt was in the hands of the rigorists. But it was also a religion of lively hope. . . . But lastly, the benefits of becoming a Christian were not confined to the next world. A Christian congregation was from the first a community in a much fuller sense than any corresponding group of Isiac or Mithraist devotees. Its members were bound together not only by common rites but by a common way of life and, as Celsus shrewdly perceived, by their common danger. Their promptitude in bringing material help to brethren in captivity or other distress is attested not only by Christian writers but by Lucian, a far from sympathetic witness. Love of one's neighbour is not an exclusively Christian virtue, but in our period the Christians appear to have practised it much more effectively than any other group. The Church provided the essentials of social security: it cared for widows and orphans, the old, the unemployed, and the disabled; it provided a burial fund for the poor and a nursing service in time of plague. But even more important, I suspect, than these material benefits was the sense of belonging which the Christian community could give. Modern social studies have brought home to us the universality of the 'need to belong' and the unexpected ways in which it can influence human behaviour, particularly among the rootless inhabitants of great cities. I see no reason to think that it was otherwise in antiquity: Epictetus has described for us the dreadful loneliness that can beset a man in the midst of his fellows. Such loneliness must have been felt by millions—the urbanised tribesman, the peasant come to town in search of work, the demobilised soldier, the rentier ruined by inflation, and the manumitted slave. For people in that situation membership of a Christian community might be the only way of maintaining their self-respect and giving their life some semblance of meaning. Within the community there was human warmth: some one was interested in them, both here and hereafter. It is therefore not surprising that the earliest and the most striking advances of Christianity were made in the great cities—in Antioch, in Rome, in Alexandria. Christians were in a more than formal sense members one of another. I think that was a major cause, perhaps the strongest single cause, of the spread of Christianity.