

The relationship between religion and the state has vexed many people in many different countries over the ages. In modern North America the dominant view is that the two are completely separate and distinct, but such was not the accepted view of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, in the first century BC/AD. He firmly believed that the state and religion were inextricably joined, and one of his major concerns upon coming to power was that the official state religion of Rome seemed to be in decline, with many traditional cults and rites falling into neglect. Such a trend was viewed by Augustus as extremely dangerous to the state, since Rome needed the pax deorum (literally, the peace of the gods) in order to maintain its well-being and its power. To alienate the gods by neglecting them was tantamount to political suicide.

Accordingly, to insure the continuing might of Rome, Augustus began an ambitious program of religious reform. As a first step, he saw to it that temples and shrines which had fallen into disrepair were either repaired or rebuilt, and, by 28 B.C., he had restored some 82 temples and shrines in Rome. But new temples were also needed, such as the Temple of the Divine Julius (Caesar, of course), erected in the heart of the Roman Forum, or the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine Hill. But the two most famous temples to be built during the reign of Augustus were 1) the Temple of Mars the Avenger, the remains of which still stand today in the so-called Forum of Augustus, and 2) the first Pantheon--not the one found in Rome today, but an earlier version built by Augustus' good friend, M. Agrippa.

But buildings alone cannot revive a stagnant or moribund religion, so Augustus tried to reach into the spiritual life of his subjects by reviving various traditional priest-hoods and brotherhoods whose prestige and membership had fallen drastically. Indeed, the emperor himself joined quite a few of these religious fellowships in order to set a good example for his subjects. One example of Augustus' efforts in this area is that of the so-called Arval Brotherhood (blessers of crops and fields), a college of 12 men which was reconstituted by the emperor around 27 B.C.

A special problem faced the emperor with regard to the Flamen Dialis--a special priest of Jupiter--since no one had held this important post since 87 B.C. The reason for such a long vacancy was not hard to fathom: the position, while prestigious, was encumbered by many strange taboos: for example, the Flamen Dialis could not be away from the city of Rome more than 3 nights (and thus could not engage in a military career, etc.); could not even gaze upon an army; could do no common labor; could not eat wheat, raw meat or beans, and so on. That Augustus found someone willing to take the post thus attests to his powers of persuasion!

Another of his concerns was the Vestal Virgins, a group of young women, traditionally the daughters of aristocrats, who served the goddess Vesta (goddess of the hearth) for 30 years or more. As the name implies, chastity was a requirement, and a Vestal Virgin who acted improperly in this respect could be buried alive in punishment. By the time Augustus came to power, fewer and fewer "candidates" were available since most

aristocratic families disliked committing their daughters to Vesta--preferring instead to use them in making important alliances through marriage. To keep their numbers up, Augustus gave the Vestals more privileges and even, by 5 A.D., allowed the daughters of freedmen to join.

The greatest public manifestation of Augustus' religious zeal came in 17 B.C., when he and Agrippa sponsored the Ludi Saeculares ("Secular Games), traditionally held every 100 years as a festival of atonement and Thanksgiving. Having juggled the dates a bit to justify a celebration in 17 B.C., Augustus spared little expense, and even performed various sacrifices and other religious rites in person, hoping to inspire in the Roman population a sense of a "new beginning", of a new "golden age", when Rome and the gods were in harmony. One highlight of the celebration must have been the performance of the Carmen Saeculare, a poem written especially for this event by Horace, and performed by a choir of boys and girls

(this poem is still extant). Other activities included games and theatrical performances.

Five years later, in 12 B.C., Augustus took for himself the position of Pontifex Maximus--the chief priest of the state religion--and thus formally became the head of both Church and State. The integration of the two bodies was now complete. Yet, historians today are left with the feeling that Augustus in the end did not really achieve his goal in reviving traditional Roman religion: foreign cults and rites continued to spread into Rome, Greek philosophies such as Stoicism and Epicureanism found many followers, and there was as well a growing trend towards agnosticism. But there remains the fact that traditional Roman religion did survive far into the Empire, although in a weakened state. It was only when Constantine made Christianity the official state religion that the old pagan gods and goddesses began to fall by the wayside for good.

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Phoebe silvarumaque potens Diana,  
lucidum caeli decus, o colendi  
semper et culti, date quae precamur  
tempore sacro

quo Sibyllini monuere versus  
virgines lectas puerosque castos  
dis, quibus septem placuere colles,  
dicere carmen.

alme Sol, curru nitido diem qui  
promis et celas aliusque et idem  
nascaris, possis nihil urbe Roma  
visere maius.

(Horace, Carmen Saeculare 1-12)