

MITHRAS  
— TO —  
MORMON

A RELIGIOUS HISTORY  
OF LONDON



PHILIPPA BERNARD



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# Foreword

ON THE 7TH MAY 1913, a group of suffragettes planted a bomb under the throne at St Paul's Cathedral. I was installed on that same throne as the 133rd Bishop of London – the first woman to hold the office. The *Daily Gazette* of that evening in 1913 reported,

An enormous bomb, with a clock and battery attachment, was discovered under the Bishop's throne at the St Paul's Cathedral today...The dean conducted even-song near the Bishop's throne last evening, but neither he nor the verger then noticed the package or heard the ticking.

The relationship between London and religion has meant that the Church has never had the luxury of remaining unchanged. Wars, revolutions, famine and disease have shaped the human spirit and the way religion is represented in the capital. Through monarchs, popes, bishops and reformers, and through movements of lay people, the Spirit of God has disrupted and subverted, and caused the Church to reimagine its shape and ministry.

We know of our religious past by what others have left behind. Early maps of the city show skylines of spire and towers. Today the skyline is shaped by religion, the fire, war and now the desire to build communities in the sky – the highest being the Shard at 306 metres. But London's churches, chapels and religious buildings survive and can be seen across the city. Although a number have been lost, many are on sites of early buildings such as St Paul's Cathedral, where there has been for more than 1,400 years a Cathedral dedicated to St Paul on London's highest point. Knowing our history helps us to shape our future and to leave behind a legacy which will build resilient and coherent communities.

London today is a multi-racial and multi-faith city. Whilst some people no longer define themselves by a specific religion, many remain spiritual and maybe we are no different from those who have occupied the city throughout history. Immigration brought Christianity, Judaism – and more recently the *Windrush* brought charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity. Often it has been political, religious or economic persecution which have brought others such as Hindus and Muslims.

The post-World War Two period gave rise to more collaborative attitudes to other faiths. However, there have been more recent threats to a growing climate of tolerance, including the terrorist attacks on London, and the Brexit Referendum. Ultimately, society and the Church should have the confidence to ensure freedom of religion and belief, working in partnership. Freedom of expression, and religious and community resilience and coherence, are all vital in today's society. Otherwise we risk becoming economically, socially and culturally insecure, and afraid of 'the other'.

The Rt Revd and Rt Hon  
Dame Sarah Mullally, DBE  
Bishop of London

# Introduction

LONDON HAS CHANGED GREATLY in the last one hundred years as the city has become the home of many different races and religions. All have found sanctuary here, some happily, some less so. But as the different tribes and communities have intermingled and expressed their beliefs, they have left their mark. But this book is not about theology or prayer, it is about people. For religion, or the lack of it, plays an important part in city life. From the earliest times, when London was a small agricultural community, overrun by the Romans and other invading peoples, she has worshipped as she wished, subject sometimes to royal command, sometimes to the will of the ordinary Londoners.

Early in her history, after the Celts vanished and the Romans left, London had only one religion, Christianity – Roman Catholicism. Within the Province of Canterbury, under the all-embracing control of the Pope, London built churches and elected bishops. But in the reign of William of Normandy another form of worship, older than Christianity, arrived in England: Judaism. The Jews of London established themselves in a small area of the city, where the community was viewed with suspicion and in 1290 Edward I banished the Jews from his kingdom.

For another 250 years London again had only one religion. Wars came and went, so did monarchs, until the civilised world's certainty about Roman Catholicism, the Pope and his dominions, was challenged by a German priest who refused to accept what few had so far dared to doubt, and the word Reformation came into English church language. In England a mighty prince saw at last a way of obtaining a long-desired divorce from his Catholic Queen and marrying his lover. He declared himself Supreme Head of the Church in England.

The sixteenth century saw the country torn apart by religious turmoil, Catholic against Protestant, family against family, until under Queen Elizabeth a fragile peace was restored, and Londoners were again permitted to worship – with discretion – as they wished.

The Stuarts believed firmly in the Divine Right of Kings – England's revolution was a political war more than a religious one. In London Charles I's execution reminded men of the frailty of even the highest of rulers, and Parliamentary rule and the Puritan ethic destroyed much of beauty and

meaning in religious life. But not all men wished to worship as King or Parliament ordained. Non-Conformity offered an alternative, and the Quakers, together with Baptists, Levellers and Shakers, Ranters and Sabbatarians, Muggletonians and many more, formed Dissenting groups, each with its own creed and method of worship. Under Cromwell the Jews returned and the following century John Wesley introduced Methodism.

Any religion alternative to the Anglican Protestant creed forfeited the possibility of obtaining a university degree, being called to the Bar or becoming a Member of Parliament. Finally under Queen Victoria emancipation allowed this to happen and London began to acquire the multi-cultural image so familiar today.

Victoria, Empress of India, ushered in a British Empire where men's eyes were opened to new religions from the dominions overseas and by the time of her death, London was a seething mass of people of many colours and creeds who worshipped God in a very different way from the comfortable English parish church style. The East End of London welcomed the Huguenots, then the Jews and by today people from Bangladesh and other Asian nations.

It is the story of these Londoners and the effect religion had upon their lives that concern this book. For religion is not only about creed and worship but about those who believe or don't, who pray or don't. Interfaith collaboration is, or should be, a feature of English life today. London has always been at the heart of the exercise of religion, the core of its history and the scene of its development. As long as she remains the capital of Great Britain it is always likely to be so.

## CHAPTER I

# Celts and Romans

IN ACCORDANCE WITH the principles of true history, I have simply sought to commit to writing what I have collected from common report for the instruction of posterity.<sup>1</sup> So the Venerable Bede introduced his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, one of the earliest comprehensive accounts of religion in this country. ‘Common report’ since Bede’s account, completed in 731 CE, has extended from historiography, archaeology and palaeography to modern methods of investigation such as carbon-dating, satellite imagery and thermography. However, Bede’s account of the religion practised by his contemporaries and their ancestors, wide-ranging though it certainly was, has been far outdistanced by the huge number of different theologies and forms of worship known today in England and particularly in London.

### London on Thames

This site on the north bank of the river Thames was an excellent place to build a town. Even before Julius Caesar made his first investigative visit there in 55BCE, with another invasion two years later, there must have been some small settlement there, though there is little evidence of it. In the Finsbury area, where the river Fleet – now below ground – ran towards the Thames, excavations have found traces of early civilisation. The Thames was shallower then and fordable; Rufus, Lord Noel-Buxton, tried to prove it could still be done when he attempted to walk across it at Westminster in 1952, and failed. It was a tidal river, much higher today than it was two thousand years ago, allowing boats to bring cargoes some way up river into England from the sea. The countryside around was fertile, so the inhabitants of a small settlement had access to corn and good grassland for grazing cattle. Julius Caesar mentions finding a fortified place – an *oppidum* – when he came to England.

Professor R.E.M. Wheeler, former Curator of the London Museum, was firmly of the opinion that London did not exist before the coming of the Romans. He conceded that the gravel subsoil on which London stands, was

eminently suitable for a town and for a bridge across the Thames. The river, he said 'was the most constantly used of all the highways into Britain for purposes of foreign trade and immigration. But it was used as a highway rather than a mere gateway.'<sup>2</sup> As any incursion by Rome into neighbouring provinces was usually preceded by traders opening up lines of communication to supply the armies, it is likely that London was already a thriving port before the Emperor Claudius's arrival in 43CE.

There was probably no bridge across the river until Claudius came, when the first bridge was built, approximately where the present London Bridge now stands. On the far side lay Southwark, with two large islands in between. London was a valuable trading post, and seemed set to flourish as an important feature of Imperial Rome, until the appalling treatment of the Royal leaders of the Iceni tribe in East Anglia by the Roman governor of the province led to a violent uprising by its queen, Boudica, and her onslaught on London.

Rome's capital of Britannia, Camulodunum (Colchester), was the first to be destroyed by Boudica and her warriors, before they swept into London, which the Roman Commander-in-Chief, Suetonius, refused to defend, knowing that the impending hordes outnumbered his army. The attackers annihilated everything they could lay hands on, slaughtering men, women and children and laying waste to the town by fire. Every subsequent analysis of London's early settlement has found inches-thick layers of red ash where the early town had been consumed in the flames. Boudica and her army then went on to Verulamium (St Albans) which received the same treatment; they were finally defeated by the Roman army in the Midlands, the Queen poisoned by her own hand.

## London Rebuilt

After the destruction of London, the Roman skill in building bridges, fortifications and walls, was soon put to good use, and quite quickly the small ruined agricultural settlement became a thriving town, with roads fanning out across England to the north, west and south. Even today the road names are familiar in most parts of the countryside: Watling Street to the northwest, Fosse Way to the west, Stane Street to the south. Roman technology and architectural expertise were employed to make London, rebuilt on a grid system, a centre of international trade. Situated as it was on several hills – Cornhill, Lud Hill and Tower Hill, not unlike the conquerors' home city itself – it enjoyed a commanding position above the surrounding countryside, though it never became an important military post. The rebuilding of the city after Boudica's destruction included a surrounding stone wall, two miles long, twenty feet high and about seven

feet thick, enclosing an area of some 330 acres, the largest walled town in Britain, with something close to 30,000 inhabitants. Included in the reconstruction were defences, quays and workshops. New gates in the wall included those now located at Bishopsgate, Newgate and Aldgate.

By the year 100 London was the biggest town in Britain. Her population now amounted to some 45,000, including the slaves on whom a stable society depended. It was a multi-racial city; many of the wealthier citizens wore the toga and spoke Latin. When Christianity finally came to be Britain's central religion, Latin was adopted as the principal ceremonial language used by the Church, as it remained for many centuries to come. The Romans brought with them a much greater degree of literacy than the Celts had enjoyed. Indeed literacy was compulsory in the Roman army. Their homes were elaborately constructed houses, with hypocausts, gardens, mosaics and marble decoration, though little is known of how ordinary Londoners lived. London was supervised by the procurator sent from Rome, Julius Classicianus. It was a part of his duties to oversee London's financial affairs, taxation, expenditure and fiscal irregularities. When he died in 65 his wife Julia Platanus erected a great marble tomb in his honour – 'to the spirits of the departed'. Parts of it were later discovered in the stone of the Roman wall. It has now been reconstructed and is in the British Museum.

As the town grew, all the usual necessities of a thriving population, food distribution areas, workshops and granaries were constructed, together with a forum and a large basilica. This was not a church but an Imperial centre of civic government, combining administrative offices, law courts and a large market. Leadenhall market stands today on almost the same site, dating back to the early fourteenth century. London was a vital supplier of goods to the Roman army: stores, slaves and billets with a large arsenal. There was a barracks at Cripplegate, of playing-card shape, enclosing an area some 250 yards square, with a rampart, probably built in the early second century. Not far away, to the north of the present St Paul's, was a large cemetery. An amphitheatre is known to have existed on the site of the present Guildhall (where it has recently been reconstructed). In 125 widespread fire destroyed a large part of the city, but most was rebuilt, this time with a network of dykes and waterways together with a sewerage system, using some of the now underground rivers running into the Thames, the Fleet, the Westbourne, the Walbrook, Tyburn Brook and Stamford Brook.

## The Religions of Roman London

There is little evidence of the old Celtic religion which played a part in the lives of early Londoners. Indeed, there are few traces of the Celts at all in the London area. A magnificent horned helmet was dredged up from the Thames at Waterloo, exhibited in the British Museum exhibition of 2015, *Celts – Art and Identity*, together with a contemporary bronze shield from Battersea. Laurence Gomme, in *The Making of London*, says, ‘Celtic Londoners were tribesmen, with tribal civilisation, tribal economy and tribal methods of life.’<sup>3</sup> Celtic worship depended mainly on local gods and goddesses, deities of the woods and streams, with no one god in command. Small shrines and temples could be erected anywhere but very little trace is found in southern England. Peter Ackroyd, in his great book on London, ties in the Celtic religion with some of London’s place names,<sup>4</sup> particularly those connected with water such as Holywell and Spring Street. Before the Romans took the town there must have been some attention paid to the local deities. Boudica herself was a Celt, though her short presence in London has left no evidence of worship or prayer. A few of the Celtic traditions such as the ceremony of the horned king or the Green Man, do have a resonance today, in the names of inns or districts such as Hornsey. There is a ‘Green Man’ carving in Westminster Abbey in the Pew Chapel, though it cannot have been of Celtic origin. The Celtic leaders, the Druids, were considered by the Romans as a possible threat through their influence over their fellow worshippers, and they were suppressed, though they have left little sign that they were ever much in evidence in London. One legend of these early times was that of Bran, the Celtic leader, who ordered that when he died his head should be cut off and buried where the White Tower of the Tower of London stands today. The name ‘bran’ means raven, supposedly the origin of the ravens at the Tower.

The Roman invaders usually allowed their subject states to worship in their own way, so London became a strange mixture of the old religion of the Britons, worship of the Roman gods and the interpolation of the Eastern religions that Rome admitted to her pantheon. For religion was a vital integral part of Roman life, at home in Rome itself and wherever the invaders had settled; the Emperor himself was worshipped as a God, though in Britain this did not happen until he was dead. The worship of the Emperor Claudius as a personal god was at first confined to Colchester, originally the principal city of Roman Britain, then a *provincia* of Rome. When London was rebuilt after Boudica’s demolition, the cult of emperor worship was transferred there. An inscribed stone dedicated to Caesar Augustus (the Emperor’s title) was found in the city, though it may have been moved during reconstruction. It bears the name of the Province of London.

The Lares and Penates, the gods of the hearth and home, found a place in the homes of Londoners, with small shrines where domestic worship could form a part of daily life, and where the gods could be petitioned for private favours in return for gifts of statuettes, jewellery or other personal possessions. Features of the Londoners' original Celtic worship were absorbed into Roman rites, including fertility cult figures and harvest festivals. The superstitions of the earlier religions melded with Roman and eastern mystic beliefs. The temples of the town, which was now big enough to be a city, could not accommodate large numbers. They were not really designed for congregations, but were guarded and managed by priests. Those erected to the eastern deities were welcomed by Londoners. These mystic deities seemed to offer a more satisfying religious need than the Roman classical gods. A belief in an afterlife, secret forms of worship to which not all were admitted and an influence on the daily life of the adherent, attracted many to offer prayers to gods and goddesses from Egypt, Persia and Asia Minor.

## Religions from the East

Ralph Merrifield, sometimes referred to as 'the father of London archaeology', was the first to plot a detailed plan of Roman London. He speaks in his book *Roman London* of 'arid paganism'<sup>5</sup> with no future after death or comfort for the bereaved, opening the way for the warmer, more joyous features of the eastern religions imported by Rome. The temples dedicated to these more exotic deities were of simple stone construction, usually with a stone seat around the inside and a raised sanctuary in an apse at the end, as the one to Mithras showed, when excavated in Walbrook in 1957 and now reconstructed at the Bloomberg Space. There was a long narrow nave with low benches facing inwards with an outer room screened off, probably for the use of the priests. Temples to the god Mithras were usually underground, originally in a cave, and the London site would have been on the banks of the (now underground) Walbrook river. A Mithraeum existed in most garrison towns in Britain. The discovery of the temple in London included a statue of Mithras himself, and an inscription from a Roman soldier commemorating his worship of the god. The original temple dates from the second century but was later rededicated to the Roman god Bacchus.

Associated with the Mithraic cult was the ritual slaying of bulls, with links to the journey of the sun across the sky. The early Christian writer Tertullian's account of the cult describes how

Deep in a cave, in the very camp of darkness, a crown is presented to the candidate at the point of a sword, as if in the mimicking of martyrdom, and it is placed upon his head. He gives it to the god, saying that he claims Mithras as his crown, and never crowns himself again.<sup>6</sup>

The Mithraic cult attracted officers from the army and wealthy traders as well as those engaged in financial and civic affairs. Only men could participate in Mithraic worship, and were expected to conform to the highest conventions of honourable and courageous behaviour.

Another temple known to have existed in London was dedicated to Cybele, the mother goddess. Her symbol was a lion on which she could cross mountains. Her cult was popular with women, who celebrated her festival in March with baptism in the blood of a bull. Cybele's priests (the Galli) castrated themselves when serving her. A bronze castration clamp was found in the Thames and is now in the Museum of London. Cybele's young lover, Attis, was also castrated. A figure, believed to be of Attis, was found in the foundations of the Bevis Marks synagogue, the first built in London in 1701, after the readmission of the Jews in 1656.

The Egyptian goddess Isis was also known to have been worshipped in a temple in London in the Tooley Street area. She and her consort Serapis, were the gods of creation and bronze statuettes of them were found on the site, with a marble statue of the god Oceanus, connected with the Mithraic cult. The goddess's devotees would scatter perfumed flowers on the roads, and celebrated her festivals with trumpets, while her sacred boat foretold a new and prosperous sailing season, wishing success and safety to all ships and sailors. Another temple dedicated to Diana may have stood at the top of Ludgate Hill, on the site later occupied by St Paul's Cathedral. William Camden gives details of finds excavated at the site as does Wren when rebuilding the Cathedral after the Fire, but no evidence of such a temple can be confirmed.

## Judaism

There has been some debate as to whether there were any Jews in England before the Norman Conquest. Although it is accepted that Jews were frequently present as traders, slaves or as soldiers when the Roman armies were deployed, no tangible trace of a Jewish community has been identified. A few coins from Greece and the Levant have been found and pottery from the workshop of Vitalis, a common Jewish name, have appeared from time to time. Many recruits from Greece were known to have fought with the army but there is no reason to suppose there were Jews among them. The historian Shimon Appelbaum discussed the question at some length but came to the conclusion that although it was perfectly possible that there was a Jewish presence in England, as there was in Gaul and other Roman provinces, no definite conclusions can be drawn from this.<sup>7</sup>

## Roman Worship

The Roman pantheon was based on the Imperial worship of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, personified by the Emperor, a symbol of Rome itself. His priests and priestesses were chosen annually from the native British tribes. They had to pay for all the trappings and celebrations of their religion. The other gods – Mars, god of war, whom the soldiers worshipped, Mercury, god of trade and commerce, communications and poetry, referred to by R.G. Collingwood as ‘a genial and condescending god’<sup>8</sup>, Hercules, the god of Rome, half human, half divine, all played a part in the huge number of small cults which grew up around the imperial religion of the conquerors. London, therefore, and much of the rest of Britain, was free to pay homage to any of the gods of Rome, of the East, or of their own home-grown Celtic religion.

In 200 Britain was divided into two: Britannia Inferior, controlled from York and Britannia Superior ruled from London. From then on the city began to decline, though it retained the title Augusta. The river levels fell during the next century, trade declined and the population shrank. By the time the Romans left in 400 it was an almost derelict city.

## The Coming of Christianity

It was hardly surprising then that when a new religion arrived in Britain it needed to draw together these multiple strands of worship. What was different about Christianity was that it worshipped only one god, admitting of no other, as its mother religion, Judaism, had done. If it was adopted in England on any scale it would augur the end of both the Roman and the pagan forms of prayer. But London was declining. It was ripe for takeover by the savage barbarian tribes from North Germany and from Scandinavia.