

Constantine's Influence on Christian Historiography

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

Christian historiography and the Roman Empire are explicitly linked, as there was no escaping the influence of the Empire in the creation of their movement. In *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, Ernst Breisach writes how the Christians "at first baffled Roman society. Then, bafflement turned to annoyance and finally outright hostility as the distance between Roman institutions and Christian faith and practice became even more visible."

At first, Christian life and writings took shape in opposition to Rome, pitting a small community against a vast empire. By the third century, Christianity had its own sacred books, its own rituals, and its own ideas. This was also the great age of persecutions, where Roman Empire wakes up and realizes that there is something new, and from their perspective, sinister, taking place in new groups that threatened the social order and ultimately the political order of the Empire. The third century was not only the century of Christian persecution but the century of its salvation. The Emperor Constantine's vision in 312 and his actions in becoming a patron of the church possibly saved the Christian movement from disappearing. His actions had a direct influence on the formulation of Christian historiography and the transformation of Christianity from a persecuted minority to the official religion of the state.

The Christian teachings spread at first among the poor, the people at the bottom of society, those whom Greek glories and Roman splendors had passed over or enslaved. They had the least to delight in or to hope for in the existing world. Women were also drawn in to the new religion, perhaps in part because early Christianity offered them more autonomy and more opportunities for leadership than found in the traditional order of Roman law and families. In the view of the Romans in the first two centuries, Christianity was an unauthorized and repugnant branch of Judaism. The religion of the Jews was tolerated though, because it was a religion established of old and because it identified a nation, albeit a nation whose members were dispersed throughout the Greek and Latin-speaking lands of the empire. While some Romans were attracted to Jewish belief, there were signs of popular dislike of Jews in Rome. The big communities of Jews and Jewish proselytes were important social facts that had to be dealt with by the Roman governors.

Eric Dodds writes, "Both Christianity and pagan philosophy were in continuous process of change and development...and the relationship between them changed accordingly." To the Romans, Christianity seemed more like a conspiracy. Adoring a leader who had been executed as a subversive and likely revolutionary, they preached his imminent return in glory to establish a thousand-year reign on earth. Their rites were secret, but in public they affected a snobbish purity and when pressed often defied common sense by enthusiastically embracing martyrdom. They shunned the theater and the arena as much as they did the pagan temples. Such refusal to accommodate their worship into the family of pagan cults was as offensive to their neighbors as the exclusivity of the Jews, but in comparison to the Jews the Christians were far more fervent in their proselytizing. Worse, they seemed to be full of a hatred for the society around them.

The Romans had experience with such cults before. In 186 BC, they had suppressed a Bacchic cult that seemed conspiratorial in nature and the cult of Isis had been banned by Emperor Tiberius. The Jews too were not immune from repression under Tiberius and Claudius, and Domitian punished Jewish superstitions in his immediate family. Thus, in dealing with the Christians, Roman officials could count on a general atmosphere of suspicion and dislike among the populace. Nero capitalized on the Christians unpopularity

to place the blame for the great fire in Rome of 64 squarely on their shoulders. From the time of Nero's persecution until the third century the Christians were subjected to accusations which brought them before the Roman authorities in the provinces. Such instances would be called to the attention of the Roman governor, as they were when, in 109, Pliny the Younger as governor of Bithynia turned to the emperor Trajan for clarification of procedure in such cases. Trajan's reply was that there was to be no hunting down of Christians and that anonymous accusations were not to be allowed. The government thus kept a hands-off policy, unless faced with a specific charge. Like most Romans, Pliny despised the Christians for what the Romans considered atheism (an unwillingness to see their God as part of the pagan pantheon) and punished them if they persisted when charged. But he also clearly felt that they were not a menace to public order and that the accusations of orgies involving men and women who called each other brother and sister and the charges of infant sacrifice leveled against them were unfounded. This was the message he transmitted to Trajan. The mob, however, believed the Christians to be capable of the worst, and the mob more than once forced actions against them.

"By the third century," writes Breisach, "the pagan and Christian inhabitants of the Roman Empire lived in two radically different mental worlds. Pagan historians spoke of the glory of the Roman Republic, great battles, heroic deeds, and the Great Cosmic Cycle of Plato and other philosophers." A distinctly different view of history evolved in the discussions among the Christian leaders. In asserting the Old Testament view that God worked his way in history, they proposed human development with a unique beginning, central theme, and ultimate goal, told by Scripture. Like Christian faith itself, Christian interpretations of history centered on the Bible with its two canons the Old and New Testaments as the most essential historical record. Christian historical interpretations were linked from their very beginning to the quest for the pure text and its proper interpretation. Determining which of the many writings at the time were the trustworthy records of God's will and his works in history became the challenge for Christians.

Exposed to the arbitrariness of the emperors and their political motives, as well as to the disapproving masses, third-century Christians had to reflect on their position. On the one hand, they subscribed to the allegation of being different and keeping aloof from common ceremonies and amusement, accounting for this attitude. On the other, they emphasized their positive contribution to society in the fields of true worship, of morality and of historical interpretation. Most Christian leaders appreciated the Roman Empire as a peace-assuring world order, and the Emperor as God's mighty servant, but not without attacking his claim on religious veneration by his subjects.

In general, Roman officials were suspicious of Christians for their stubborn refusal to pay homage to the emperor and to the gods of Rome, though some emperors were more concerned with the persistence and spread of Christianity than others. The relative peace and security of the church from 212-40, even with brief eruption of persecution in 235, left Christians unprepared for the sharply negative turn in imperial attitudes towards Christianity that came with rule of the emperors Decius (241-51) and Valerian (253-60). Whereas much of the animosity towards Christians to this point was popular in character with the occasional backing of sporadic imperial involvement, Decius was the first emperor to engage in a systematic effort to dissuade citizens from participating in Christian practices. The emperor ordered all citizens, not just Christians, to obtain a *libellus* (certificate) showing that they sacrificed to the gods before imperial officials. Many nominal Christians quickly acquiesced while others fled or purchased certificates. But several Christian leaders were steadfast and submitted to punishment instead of renouncing their faith. Most were imprisoned, tortured, and died.

The persecution ended in 251 and the church dealt severely with Christians who gave into imperial demands. The emperor Valerian (253-60) initiated renewed persecution of Christians in 257. He issued an edict seeking to restore traditional commitment to the gods of the empire through appropriate sacrifices. He forbade Christian gatherings, arrested several bishops, and exiled others. Valerian then ordered the execution of church leaders who refused to set an example for other Christians by offering sacrifices to the gods.

Following Valerian's capture during battle in the Eastern part of the empire, his son Gallienus became emperor. He immediately put an end to the persecution. This began a more than forty-year period of relative peace between the empire and the church. Diocletian ruled from 284-304 and early on in his reign appeared to favor Christianity. But Diocletian's view began to change. There were troubles with some Christians who did not wish to serve in the army and at a sacrifice where Diocletian was present, the augurs were unable to read the typical signs from the liver of the sacrificial animals allegedly because of some of the Christians there who made the sign of the cross and so disrupted the sacrifice. Diocletian decided that Christianity was interfering with significant matters of state, and in 303 he issued the first in a series of edicts against Christianity and began an intense attack upon Christians and their churches. When Diocletian fell ill and retired from public life in 304, imperial opposition to the church continued under Galerius, who took power in the Eastern part of the empire. Galerius issued an edict in keeping with Diocletian's policy, commanding that all citizens in every country and in each city to offer sacrifices publicly and libations to the idols. Christians not only had to deal with sporadic opposition and hostility on the imperial front, they also faced significant popular opposition from Graeco-Roman society at large on a regular basis. Christian authors were on the defensive and were afraid to respond to popular caricatures of Christian faith and teaching.

In the western part of the empire Constantius Chlorus (the father of Constantine) ruled with less intense animosity towards the Christians. After Constantius died in 306, Constantine's soldiers proclaimed him emperor and he ruled in the West along with Licinius and Maxentius. At the end of October 312 Constantine was leading his army south from its latest victory toward the capital. The struggle for the succession to Diocletian's regime of shared imperial authority was entering a crucial phase. Diocletian's tetrarchy of two emperors and their two lieutenants had given Rome four rulers ready to defend the long frontier against barbarians and the threat of Persian invasion. The division of command had served the empire well. But since Diocletian had laid down his office in 304, an inevitable power struggle had taken place. In 312 Licinius and Maximinus Daia still figured as members of a reconstructed tetrarchy in the east, although Licinius was soon to eliminate his partner. In the west the struggle was between Constantine and Maxentius, both sons of members of the original tetrarchy. Constantine's had a vision of the cross-shaped trophy in the sky and of Christ appearing to him in a dream and urging him to adopt the celestial apparition as a charm to protect himself from his enemies. On that fateful day in 312 Constantine's standard carried his own portrait and the name of Christ, in the form of a ligature of its first two letters, Chi-Rho, was displayed in a wreath made of precious stones and gold which topped his staff.

Constantine had almost reached the gates of Rome at the Mulvian Bridge before his opponent came out to face him at the Mulvian Bridge on the twenty eighth of October. The victory was Constantine's. Maxentius drowned in the Tiber with many of his army. Constantine's success is commemorated in a monumental inscription on the Red Cliff s (Saxa Rubra) that overlooks the scene of the battle:

Emperor Constantine the Great On the Fifth Day before the Kalends of November in the year 312 here at the Red Cliff s With divine inspiration, Maxentius defeated, Carried the standard bearing the name of Christ into the city Inaugurating a happier

era for the human race.

This statement, only the first half of the text but all that can be read today because of the growth of trees on the slope of the cliffs, is not an ancient but a modern inscription, put in place in 1912 on the seventeen hundredth anniversary of the battle by Pope Pius X. The message is a simple interpretation of events. Constantine by divine grace carried Christianity to victory, but Constantine was fighting to win the empire for himself, not for the Christians. His biographer, Eusebius bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, who became an intimate of the emperor's late in his reign, made his subject the willing instrument of divine grace. Jacob Burckhardt dismissed Eusebius's portrait as a pious fraud and gave us Constantine the Renaissance prince. Between these extremes there are a host of historians who have attempted to chart Constantine's conversion, progressing steadily on the road to salvation or haltingly unsure, from the time of his vision or dream before the battle at the Mulvian Bridge until he took the momentous step of founding a New Rome, Constantinople, which he inaugurated in 330 and where he accepted baptism on his deathbed in 337.

After the death of Galerius and no little struggle over the consolidation of imperial rule, Constantine and Licinius in 313 jointly issued the famous Edict of Milan, which was a watershed in religious freedom especially for Christians. The emperors resolved to grant both to the Christians and to all others full authority to follow whatever worship each man has desired. The edict also stipulated that church buildings that had been destroyed during the suppression under Diocletian should be restored along with other property.

MacMullen writes in *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary*, "Upon his conversion, Constantine believed that a pious people would receive divine protection and their ruler ruled according to divine plan. He believed that God directly or through his angels could be expected to intercede in their behalf at crucial moments." Gibbon writes:

The piety of Constantine was admitted as an unexceptionable proof of the justice of his arms; and his use of victory confirmed the opinion of the Christians that their hero was inspired and conducted by the Lord of Hosts. The conquest of Italy produced a general edict of toleration; and as soon as the defeat of Licinius had invested Constantine with the sole dominion of the Roman world, he immediately, by circular letters, exhorted all his subjects to imitate without delay the example of their sovereign and to embrace the divine truth of Christianity.

Constantine's move toward Christianity was far different from the vision that overtook St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Paul's conversion was the result of an overpowering apparition. Constantine's approach to the Christian God was no more a conversion but, probably, an accommodation. As one examines his motives it is important to place Christianity in the context of Rome of 312. In the centuries following the creation of the Augustan regime the energies of the Roman Empire had been drawn in two directions. The first was toward the European frontier, reaching from England and the Rhine to the shores of the Black Sea and fronting on the ever-present threat of barbarian incursion. The second pole that attracted Roman energy was the eastern frontier bordering on Persia but also containing within it Palestine, where revolts by the Jewish population troubled the reigns of Vespasian and Hadrian, and the lands that formed the domain of Queen Zenobia of Palmyra in the third century. From the east there came religion. Whatever the reasons for embracing Christianity, Constantine enabled it to flourish and made it the state religion.

In his book *The Emperor Constantine*, Hans Pohlsander explains that the Roman government had always regarded the oversight and regulation of religious affairs as one of its legitimate functions, an effort to maintain the harmonious relationship between the Roman people and the gods. The emperors themselves, beginning with Augustus, had held

the post of *pontifex maximus* (high priest) and thus had stood at the head of the religious establishment. Constantine, therefore, was fully within the Roman tradition when he announced his support of Christianity, paid subsidies to the Christian church and granted immunities to its clergy. Little did he know that his actions were to mark the beginning of one of the great problems of post-classical Western Civilization, the relationship of secular authority to spiritual authority and of the state to the church.

In the winter of 312-13 Constantine began a systematic policy of giving honors, privileges and donations to the Christian Church and Christian clergy. In 324-5, as the new master of the East, he prohibited the cultic activities which until then had characterized the traditional religions of the Roman Empire, and he thus affirmed the status of Christianity as the official religion of the state and its rulers. He outlawed the performance of animal sacrifice, ordered that no new cult statues of the traditional gods be dedicated, and forbade magistrates and governors to begin official business with the traditional act of casting incense or some other similar offering on an altar standing in their court for this ceremony. He supported the Christian interpretation of history.

In conclusion, the Emperor Constantine's vision in 312 and his actions in becoming a patron of the church possibly saved the Christian movement from disappearing. His actions had a direct influence on the formulation of Christian historiography and the transformation of Christianity from a persecuted minority to the official religion of the state. Christianity grew up within the classical world of the Roman Empire. Because of Constantine's actions, it fused itself in the end with Rome's institutions and spread through its social and mental structures to become the most important legacy from that civilization. He gave the Christian movement official recognition and thus played a more important part in shaping its future than any other Christian layman. Given the success of Rome in crushing similar movements, without Constantine's support, it is doubtful that Christianity and Christian historiography would have survived or at least achieved the success that it did.

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