

## **The Consequences of the Christian Conversion of Constantine: Favoritism, Conflict, and Heresy**

Cleo R. Mills

Religion is one of the most powerful forces in all of history. It has been the catalyst behind numerous wars and has led to the suffering of countless people. Whether one considers the persecution of the Protestants under “Bloody Mary” Tudor in the 1550s, the persecution of Christians under the Roman Emperor Nero around 64 A.D., or the continued persecution of Jewish people throughout history, religion can drive people to do horrible things. However, religion can be a positive, unifying force as well.

By the Third Century A.D., the Roman Empire no longer retained its same strength and might. Much of its power that came from its centralization was now being dispersed and the capital city was moved around Italy to try and ward off the German barbarians. The massive extent of the Roman Empire did not make its plight any easier. In fact, it eventually became so much of a problem that the Empire was divided by Emperor Diocletian. Rome was now split between the East and the West, and it was on the western side of the Empire that Constantine rose to power. Diocletian ruled as emperor from 284-305 A.D. and is known well for his reunification of the Roman Empire, while his successor, Constantine, who ruled from 306-337 A.D., is known for his support for the recently persecuted Christian Church. Although Constantine’s own baptism did not occur until he was on his deathbed, his sympathy toward Christianity while he ruled facilitated the preservation and helped arrest the decline of the Roman Empire.

In regard to Constantine’s Christian sympathies, it is important to note at what point they originated. Eusebius is the chronicler who recorded the event that is credited to be the catalyst of Constantine’s turn to Christianity, the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Eusebius gives a clear description of Constantine’s vision before the battle, which took place in 312 A.D. Regarding the vision, Eusebius states, “He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS.”<sup>1</sup> Eusebius and Constantine interpreted this as divine intervention from the Christian God. Subsequently, both Eusebius and Constantine credited the aid of God for the victory against his rival emperor, Maxentius. Constantine decided to go against the tradition of Roman leaders looking for divine intervention from their pantheon of gods. Eusebius explains his reasoning as follows, “[M]any emperors who had preceded him, those who had rested their hopes in a multitude of gods, . . . at last had met with an unhappy end.”<sup>2</sup> This suggests that, under paganism, Rome and its emperors were facing a decline in

---

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *The Conversion of Constantine*, *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/conv-const.asp> (accessed November 13, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *The Conversion of Constantine*.

## *The Consequences of the Christian Conversion of Constantine*

prestige and power, leading leaders like Constantine to look for change that could rebuild and strengthen the Empire. Constantine effectively proved that he did not believe the pagan traditions of Rome could facilitate that change and, instead, looked towards the monotheistic traditions of Christianity for guidance. This decision created considerable tension, especially since Rome was built on respecting its traditions.

Predating Constantine's rise to power, the Roman Empire had suffered from a number of domestic issues. Following the Severan dynasty that ended with the assassination of Alexander Severus in 235 A.D., the Roman Empire witnessed a period of chaos and decline known as the Crisis of the Third Century.<sup>3</sup> Although Rome had recently expanded its territory, and hypothetically was gaining more might and wealth, the Empire was poisoned by internal conflicts. These problems included frequent civil war between military leaders, problems with succession that often led to these wars, high taxes, and economic instability that arose from the devaluation of Roman currency.<sup>4</sup> These problems and the inability of emperors to solve them set the stage for Constantine's rise to power and rule that would largely stabilize the Empire. After defeating Maxentius in a civil war, Constantine was sole emperor of the Western Roman Empire, ready to restore the Roman Empire to a period of stability and power. By 324 A.D., after further civil wars, Constantine had united the entire empire under his rule.

Eventually, it became apparent that Constantine's new empire needed a new capital, and that pagan Rome would not be satisfactory. This is partly due to its geographical location and the fact that it was an aging city; however, it was also filled with pagan religion. The decline of Rome as the center of Italy, and of the Roman Empire, was evident even before Constantine rose to power. Indeed, the Emperor Diocletian had already moved the capital to Ravenna. Needing to establish a new center of power, Constantine built Constantinople and intentionally designed it to be a new, Christian capital for his empire. The desire for this new capital to be predominantly Christian was made abundantly clear in the way in which the new city was financed. The Emperor required that Roman citizens who had not converted to Christianity finance the building of the new city.<sup>5</sup> This was a quite obvious way of asserting Christian dominance within the city and sending the message to pagans that their days of religious dominance within the Empire were numbered. Additionally, Constantine commissioned the building of Christian churches throughout the city, such as Hagia Irene.<sup>6</sup> While many new Christian elements were present in Constantinople, the city, in many ways, still showed reverence to the traditions of Rome. It

---

<sup>3</sup> Joshua J. Mark, "Roman Empire," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, [https://www.ancient.eu/Roman\\_Empire/](https://www.ancient.eu/Roman_Empire/) (accessed February 27, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Mark, "Roman Empire."

<sup>5</sup> Constantine Bourlakis, "The Emperor's New Mind: On Constantine I's Decision to Legalize Christianity," *International Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2016): 47-59.

<sup>6</sup> Donald L. Wasson, "Constantinople," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ancient.eu/Constantinople/> (accessed November 13, 2019).

contained aqueducts, an enlarged hippodrome, and even some small pagan temples.<sup>7</sup> Even though Constantine was trying to set Constantinople apart as a new Roman capital for his new Roman Empire, he still understood the importance of including traditional Roman elements, and the long-term preservation of the Roman Empire. However, the movement of the capital to the Christian Constantinople, the aging of pagan religion in the Empire, and the subsequent rise of monotheistic religions around the world (such as Islam, Judaism and Christianity) spurred the Roman Empire's transition from a pagan, polytheistic Empire to a monotheistic, Christian Empire.

To preserve an institution as expansive as the Roman Empire, one of Constantine's major challenges was bringing the entirety of the Empire under one religion, ideologically and in practice, especially since the monotheistic nature of Christianity is quite a stark contrast to the polytheistic practices of paganism. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that there were tensions between the pro-Christianity governance of Constantine and the pagan traditions of Rome. As the two religions are quite different, their coexistence without conflict was unlikely. However, in the early years after Constantine's conversion, it looked as though it might actually have been possible. This glimpse of hope came under the Edict of Milan (313 A.D.), in which Christianity was made legal after the horrific persecution Christians had experienced under previous emperors such as Nero and, most recently, Diocletian. Not only was Christianity made legal to practice, but the edict seemed to grant a great deal of religious freedom, as it states, "We have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship for the sake of the peace of our times, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as he pleases; this regulation is made that we may not seem to detract from any dignity or any religion."<sup>8</sup> In theory, this seemed to create a Roman Empire in which the traditional pagan religion and Christianity could coexist peacefully. However, this was not always the case. Since the concept of separation of church and state was not really in practice yet, the emperor had a great deal of influence over religion. Constantine's Christian sympathies led to instances in which Constantine favored Christianity over other religions. An example of this favor may be found in an imperial letter included in Eusebius's *The Church History*. It was sent to Anulinus, a prominent church leader in northern Africa. The letter from Constantine included a decree that stated, "So I desire that those in your province in the catholic church . . . who devote their services to this sacred worship . . . should once and for all be kept entirely free from all public duties."<sup>9</sup> This exemption of clergymen from taxes and state labor shows obvious favor to the

---

<sup>7</sup> Wasson, "Constantinople."

<sup>8</sup> "Galerius and Constantine: Edicts of Toleration 311/313," *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, [sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/edict-milan.asp](http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/edict-milan.asp) (accessed November 14, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius, *The Church History*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2007), 327.

### *The Consequences of the Christian Conversion of Constantine*

Christians since the same favor was not shown to pagan priests. In fact, many pagans faced persecution rather than favor under Constantine. Constantine appointed mainly Christians to be provincial governors and forbade pagan governors the long-established custom of preceding official business with a sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> Not only were Christians being granted obvious favors, but pagans were being actively persecuted against legally. In addition to this, Constantine laid out stricter anti-pagan legislation. Constantine issued laws that stripped pagans of their practice of idolatry, thus barring their ability to perform many of the basic practices of their religion such as sacrifice, consulting oracles, and the building of statues.<sup>11</sup> Thus, this further exemplifies the lack of favor given to pagans under the Christianized rule of Constantine. Constantine actively sought to strip pagans of their religious power and freedom, during his reign; meanwhile, he was actively facilitating the rise of Christianity. Another decree to the Bishop of Carthage granted extra funds to Christian churches. In the imperial letter Constantine states, “Since it has been our pleasure that in all provinces . . . the holy catholic religion should receive some contribution for expenses, I have sent a letter to Ursus . . . directing that he pay three thousand *folles* [a double denarius] to Your Constancy.”<sup>12</sup> Money from the government being given directly to build Christian churches demonstrates imperial favoritism towards Christianity. This is another clear example of Constantine showing favor to Christians, and thus further dividing the pagans and Christians. However, Constantine believed that he needed to take action to bring all of Rome under one religion, even if it was forcibly.

As is expected, unifying an entire religion under one ruler will inevitably lead to differences in ideology. Christianity under Constantine was surely no exception. As both the leader of the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, Constantine’s own personal opinions regarding Christianity were quite powerful and held a lot of weight. This is shown clearly through the councils at Nicaea and at Constantinople. It was around 325 A.D. when a debate came up regarding the nature of Christ. The main dispute came from Arius, a priest from Alexandria. He argued that since Christ was the son of God and was effectively created from nothing, he was not equal to God.<sup>13</sup> This idea gained traction with many Christians and led Constantine to call for the Council of Nicaea to address the problem, a council about which he felt so strongly that he oversaw it personally. At this council, the Nicene Creed was adopted as the definitive answer regarding the nature of Christ. In the Creed, Christ is said to be of the “same essence” of the Father, and it is said that, “And we believe in the Holy Spirit the Lord, the

---

<sup>10</sup> T. D. Barnes, “Constantine’s Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice,” *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 105, no. 1 (Spring, 1984): 69-72 at 7.

<sup>11</sup> Barnes, “Constantine’s Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice,” 70.

<sup>12</sup> Eusebius/Maier, *The Church History*, 326.

<sup>13</sup> Donald F. Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (New York City: Routledge, 2013), 10.

giver of life. He proceeds from the Father and the Son.”<sup>14</sup> This is the basis of one of the most famous, transcendent principles of Christianity, that of the Trinity, which shows the influence Constantine and his empire had on Christianity in ancient and modern times as well. By taking a role as both the imperial and religious head of Rome, Constantine was able to unite the Empire in ways it had not been before.

Although Constantine sought to unite the Roman Empire under Christianity, his own devotion to the Christian faith has been questioned. An obstruction that eclipses the light of Constantine’s completely Christian empire is speculation into his own discipleship and faith in Christianity. The main source on Constantine, Eusebius, was not only a close friend of Constantine, but a Christian as well. These two facts alone poison his writings with a strong amount of potential bias; additionally, a majority of his works regarding Constantine were written after the emperor’s death. Eusebius may have been writing and interpreting from a more Christian perspective, ignoring the parts of paganism that were still present in Constantine’s rule. For example, the Arch of Constantine, a great architectural marvel near the Coliseum in Rome, shows the victory over Maxentius as attributed to the sun god, as the emperor stands alongside a chariot of the sun god.<sup>15</sup> This puts doubt into the mind, that Constantine was a solely Christian emperor. In addition to the sun god, the monument is riddled with many other pagan deities such as Victory, Hercules, Apollo, and Diana.<sup>16</sup> The overwhelming amount of paganism shown through the Arch’s sculptures and the apparent absence here of Christian symbols seem to present the idea that Constantine may not have always been the loyal Christian Eusebius presented him to be. In addition to this, symbols of paganism appear on the coinage of Constantine’s reign. Pagan symbols of both Sol, Invictus, and Mars are found on his coins.<sup>17</sup> However, his direct persecution of paganism and work defining some of the key principles of modern Christianity, such as the Trinity, suggest that he still was a devout Christian. Regardless of his own practice of Christianity, his devotion to its spread across the Roman Empire, even at the expense of other religions, made an important impact on the longevity of the Roman Empire. Although there are indications of Constantine’s supposed support of paganism, it does not diminish the role he played in the resurgence of the Empire back into power, in early Christianity, and in the rise of Christianity in general.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Nicene Creed*, *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, [sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/nicene Creed.asp](http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/nicene Creed.asp) (accessed November 14, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Charles Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 227.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Cartwright, “The Arch of Constantine, Rome,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/497/the-arch-of-constantine-rome/> (accessed December 7, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Donald L. Wasson, “Constantine I,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, [https://www.ancient.eu/Constantine\\_I/](https://www.ancient.eu/Constantine_I/) (accessed December 7, 2019).

*The Consequences of the Christian Conversion of Constantine*

As always, the historical significance of Constantine and his sympathy and eventual assimilation to Christianity is still quite pertinent today and exerted a lasting impact on not only the longevity of the Roman Empire beyond the Imperial Crisis, but Christianity as a whole. Without Constantine's combination of toleration and restriction, the Empire could not have slowed the internal forces leading to its end. Leaders today have much to learn from the triumphs and failures of Constantine. As toleration and understanding of religious beliefs becomes more imperative than ever, it is important for humanity to look back at the successes and failures of history and learn – that in itself is the beauty of history. Whether or not the modern world listens to the wailing warnings of the past or learns from years and years of mistakes is yet to be seen. The history of Constantine, along with the rest of history, demonstrates the great power of unity and destruction that religion yields. Only time will tell if humanity wields it well.

## WORKS CITED

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Eusebius. *The Church History*. Translated by Paul L. Maier. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2007.

Eusebius. "The Conversion of Constantine." *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, [sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/conv-const.asp](http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/conv-const.asp) (accessed November 13, 2019).

"Galerius and Constantine: Edicts of Toleration 311/313." *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, [sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/edict-milan.asp](http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/edict-milan.asp) (accessed November 14, 2019).

*Nicene Creed*. *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, [sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/nicene Creed.asp](http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/nicene Creed.asp) (accessed November 14, 2019).

### SECONDARY SOURCES

#### Articles

Barnes, T. D. "Constantine's Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice." *The American Journal of Philology*. Vol. 105, no. 1 (1984): 69–72.

Bourlakis, Constantine. "The Emperor's New Mind: On Constantine I's Decision to Legalize Christianity." *International Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol. 5, no. 1 (2016): 47–59.

Cartwright, Mark. "The Arch of Constantine, Rome." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/497/the-arch-of-constantine-rome/> (accessed December 7, 2019).

Mark, Joshua A. "Roman Empire." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, [https://www.ancient.eu/Roman\\_Empire/](https://www.ancient.eu/Roman_Empire/) (accessed February 27, 2020).

Wasson, Donald L. "Constantinople." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, [www.ancient.eu/Constantinople/](http://www.ancient.eu/Constantinople/) (accessed November 13, 2019).

Wasson, Donald L. "Constantine I." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, [https://www.ancient.eu/Constantine\\_I/](https://www.ancient.eu/Constantine_I/) (accessed December 7, 2019).

#### Books

Freeman, Charles. *A New History of Early Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Logan, F. Donald. *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2013.