

Assess the impact on the Christian movement of the conversion of Constantine.

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The impact Constantine's alleged conversion<sup>1</sup> had on Christianity are seen in light of the imperial mandates made in the edict of Milan and first Christian [ecumenical<sup>2</sup>] council convened at Nicaea in 325<sup>3</sup>. The edict terminated the persecution of Christians, guaranteeing freedom of worship, and all properties confiscated or destroyed to be returned [or else the victims reimbursed for their loss<sup>4</sup>]. This policy showed support for both Christians and pagans alike<sup>5</sup>, since it's likely that until his conversion Constantine was a regular worshipper of the sun-god as supreme deity<sup>6</sup>. As a result, new converts poured into newly built churches within the empire. Constantine's commitment to his new faith, and leading role in church affairs, extended to the many theological disputes the movement now faced.

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<sup>1</sup> The character of Constantine is difficult to assess and so are his motivations. Much is veiled behind partisan eulogies like Eusebius'. There is no reason to doubt his sincere religious conviction but he was first and foremost a propagandist, gifted military commander and unscrupulous, determined manipulator. See, Barnes, T.D., *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> *Ecumenical*, from the Koine Greek *oikoumenikos*, literally meaning worldwide but generally assumed to be limited to the Roman Empire; the earliest extant uses of the term for a council are found in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* 3.6, c. 338 [σύνοδον οἰκουμενικὴν συνεκρότει="he convoked an Ecumenical council"], Athanasius' *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica* in 369, and the Letter in 382 to Pope Damasus I and the Latin bishops from the First Council of Constantinople. Ed. Note.

<sup>3</sup> Constantine convened the council with his new eastern ally and brother-in-law, Licinius who was seen as both a liberator of the eastern provinces [from persecutions by Maximinus Daia in 313], to arch enemy of the great hero Constantine in 324. The historical accounts pertaining to Licinius are bias towards a man who patronized pagan philosophers and exercised toleration towards his Christians subjects. His influence, if any, is thwarted by the shadow of his partner's vastly superior and more ambitious goals. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* X. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Christian rejoicing proved premature, however, when in 316 Licinius started a new persecution, which Constantine finally ended via two key battles in Asia Minor in 324. Ed. Note.

<sup>5</sup> Imagery of the sun-cult appears on his coinage up to the year 320. "[Constantine] was [also] very much influenced by the theology of Origen... whose library he inherited". (Eusebius, *Life of*, p 2)

<sup>6</sup> This concept of a nebulous supreme deity lying behind the traditional religion, also shared by Aurelian and other soldier-emperors before him, was not too far removed from the Christian notion of a single omnipotent God. Ed. Note.

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Following the death of Jesus Christ, the progress of the new Christian faith was very slow due to intense, violent persecutions by the Romans. Although static and inefficient, these persecutions wounded the early Church in ways that made later conflicts within its community inevitable<sup>7</sup>. But the later decline of Roman fortunes, and strategic withdrawal from the west to the east, signaled a turning point that included the conversion of large sections of the upper, governing Roman class<sup>8</sup>.

At the time of Constantine, the Roman Empire was under the rule of Emperor Diocletian<sup>9</sup>. Any positive acclaims that may be attributed to Diocletian's 20-plus year reign were completely overshadowed by his savage persecutions, starting in 297-298<sup>10</sup>. This first and real systematic attempt by an Emperor to halt Christianity was enforced to varying degrees across the Empire. The western provinces, presided by Constantine, were scarcely affected. He nevertheless won favor for shielding them under successive anti-Christian edicts<sup>11</sup>. Eusebius<sup>12</sup> *Vita Constantini*<sup>13</sup> (*Life of Constantine*—c. 324AD) provides our main historical source for this period<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> "Nothing suggests, however, that Christianity was a formidable movement before the reign of Marcus Aurelius [161-180AD]." Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 179

<sup>8</sup> "It is highly likely that women were a clear majority in the churches of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century." Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 310. For more on this subject, see Brown, Peter, *The Body and Society*, pp. 145-154.

<sup>9</sup> A man described by the Christian polemicist, Lactantius, as the, "author of crimes and a deviser of evil [who] could not even keep his hands from God" Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 7

<sup>10</sup> Diocletian reorganized the provincial structure of the empire by: separating civil & military power and abandoning Rome as a major imperial residence, establishing new centers nearer to the troubled frontiers [at Trier & Milan in the west; Thessalonica & Nicomedia in the east]. Ed. Note.

<sup>11</sup> Apart from Eusebius and Lactantius, Constantine also received good accounts from pagan writers such as Eutropius. Johnson, *Paul. A History of Christianity*; New York: Atheneum, 1976.

<sup>12</sup> The Bishop of Caesarea & not to be confused with Eusebius, the Bishop of Nicomedia, who was very active around this time. Ed. Note.

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As emperor, Constantine acted as judge in the conflict between Donatists<sup>15</sup> and the mainstream churches of North Africa in 316<sup>16</sup>. But more significantly, his advisors called his attention to a controversy centered on the heretical teachings of Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria<sup>17</sup>. The subject was an old one, concerning the relationship of the Son, Jesus Christ, to God the Father<sup>18</sup>. Arius' "subordinationist theology"<sup>19</sup> was accepted by many Christians in the east, although western churchmen generally rejected it. The outcome of the months' long council ended in the creation of the doctrine of the Trinity. As one of the bishops, Gregory of Nyssa succinctly described it: "God is three individuals sharing one essence. Both the unity and the tripartite division of the Godhead are real. If this seems paradoxical, so be it"<sup>20</sup>. Most of the bishops agreed with what became known as the Nicene Creed and signed it<sup>21</sup>, whilst others [Theonas of Marmarica,

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<sup>13</sup> "Eusebius seems to have left [this work] unfinished or unrevised when he died himself in May 339" *Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, introduction, translation and commentary by Averil Cameron & S. G. Hall (Oxford, 1999) p 3

<sup>14</sup> Including "many other works of biblical scholarship, Christian apologetic and contemporary religious debate" Ibid. p 1

<sup>15</sup> The movement was led by Donatus who upheld the powers of the priest and denied communion to those laypeople who had lapsed during Roman persecutions. Ed. Note.

<sup>16</sup> This virtual civil war would not end until the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when invading Vandals suppressed all the churches, Donatist and orthodox alike. Ed. Note

<sup>17</sup> "We are persecuted because we say that the Son had a beginning, but that God was without a beginning...because we say that he [Jesus] is created from nothing. And this we say because he is neither part of God, nor any subjacent matter." [Arius defense letter to Eusebius] Quasten, Johannes. *Patrology Vol. 3, The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon*. Utrecht/Antwerp: Spectrum Publishers, 1960.

<sup>18</sup> This is an ongoing 'Christological' dispute even within modern Church community today. See Navas, Patrick, *Divine Truth or Human Tradition?: A Reconsideration of the Roman Catholic-Protestant Doctrine of the Trinity in Light of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures*, Authorhouse, 2006. Holt, Brian, *Jesus-God or the Son of God? A Comparison of the Arguments*, Tellway Pub, 2002 [Ed. Note]

<sup>19</sup> Rather than asserting that Jesus was divine by nature, Arius emphasized that he had earned his "adoption" as Son and his "promotion" to divine status through moral growth and obedience to God. Greeg, Robert C. & Groh E. Dennis, *Early Arianism—A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1981

<sup>20</sup> Hanson, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381AD* (T & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 723-724.

<sup>21</sup> What is known about the Council is based on fragmentary comments by a few bishops who attended the meetings. Description of it are to be found, *inter alia*, in Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3d ed., pp 205-262; Hanson, Search, pp 152-207; Barnes, Constantine & Eusebius, pp 208-223

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Secundus of Ptolemais and Arius] refused and were unceremoniously excommunicated by the emperor<sup>22</sup>.

The Council as a watershed represents the last point at which Christians with strongly opposed theological views acted civilly towards each other before these same colleagues saw themselves as sinful, corrupt, malicious and even satanic adversaries. Constantine's involvement in such theological themes was as a spectator at best, functioning as a referee among his more "enlightened", quarreling visitors. The emperor [by nature an impatient and decisive man] hoped for a quick resolution to the debates. His goal was to unite the empire's diverse, quarreling people in one huge spiritual fellowship<sup>23</sup>. He saw an opportunity to strengthen the Church's position in his 'new Rome' by unifying it doctrinally and helping to reorganize it internally. This served as a precursor to the 'infallible' role the Papacy would later try to create.

Constantine's achievements began the process for Christian legalization that created a new, imperial governing class which permanently ended the period of persecution begun by the Romans. The result was the growth, in later centuries, of a specifically Christian-Byzantine and Western-Medieval culture. The success of which remained with successive emperors protecting and favoring the policies Constantine steadfastly held until his death in 337. His zeal of approval gave the highest sanction of civil authority to a religious movement that had silently and imperceptibly wrought in public opinion for almost 300 years.

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<sup>22</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica articles on Nicene Creed, Arius, Vol. 16, 1991.

<sup>23</sup> "[His] chief concern was that a divided church would offend the Christian God [bringing] divine vengeance upon [Rome and himself]. . . Schism [he believed], was inspired by Satan". The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 16, Macropaedia: Knowledge in Depth, 1991, pp. 688-689.

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