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THE CONVERSION OF CONSTANTINE

It is very difficult or even impossible for a modern historian to prove the authenticity of a religious conversion when this conversion took place through the direct intervention of God Himself and was not the result of a human missionary. Historians will never be able to discuss this event in itself, they will always have to look at it in the light of the events that preceded it or in the light of those which followed it. The conversion of Constantine besides its supernatural aspect presents many other characteristics, which, because they depend on human actions, constitute enough material for historians to evaluate.

A short contextualisation of this uncommon episode of the life of Constantine will help us to understand better which are its links with the real events. Constantine was in the East during the Great Persecution, living at the court of Diocletian or serving in the army under the Caesar Galerius. When Diocletian and Maximian abdicated in 305, his father called him to Britain and at Constantius' death, he was acclaimed emperor by the army. He became a sovereign of the Herculian dynasty. Maximian taking again the purple gave his daughter Fausta in marriage to Constantine. Constantine's father-in-law was the earthly representative of the divine Hercules. By this marriage, the relation with this divinity became more intimate for Constantine. However, Maximian will tried to kill the young emperor and his plan being discovered he was the victim instead. At this moment occurs the "first conversion of Constantine". Discovering that he was descended from Claudius II, the emperor who stopped the Gothic invasion, he acknowledged a new protector for himself and his family, the Unconquered God Sun. He renounced to the cult of Hercules, which reminded him of the connections with Maximian's family.

In April 311, the emperor Galerius, who forced upon Diocletian the great persecution, proclaimed an edict of toleration for the Christians. The principal idea of this edict was that every god is entitled to the worship of his own people.¹ A fortnight after this, Galerius was dead. The Roman world af-

¹ *The Cambridge Medieval History*, volume I, (Cambridge, University Press, 1924), p. 3.

ter the death of Maximian and Galerius was shared between Licinius, Maximin, Maxentius, and Constantine. In the East, Licinius Augustus held Illyricum, Greece and Thrace; the Caesar Maximin held everything beyond the Bosphorus; in the West the son of Maximian, Maxentius Augustus was emperor of Italy, Spain and Africa, and Constantine was the Caesar of Gaul and Britain. The political alliances between the four emperors were determined by two elements: geographical position and the emperors' attitude towards the Christians.² Constantine who was always friendly with the Christians made an alliance with Licinius who was never a persecutor of the adepts of this religion.

Maxentius, the Augustus of the West declared war on Constantine under the pretext of revenging his father. The emperor of Britain and Gaul did not wait to be crushed by the huge army of his enemy, and attacked Italy, conquering Turin and Verona. The next stop for Constantine will be Rome.

He related many years later under oath to Eusebius of Caesarea that before the battle with Maxentius, being worried about the magical manoeuvres of his enemy he thought about a God to help him and he chose to pray the God of his father,³ since all the other divinities he had worshiped before deceived him. One afternoon when he was marching with his army he saw a shining cross above the sun and this words written in the sky, *Hoc vince*. The following night he saw Christ in his dream bidding him to place this sign upon the shields of his soldiers and to use it in the war against Maxentius. Both the ancient historians Eusebius and Lactantius describe this sign like a monogram, formed by the combination of two Greek letters *chi* and *ro*, the first letters from the name of Christ.⁴ Even if these two letters had been used before by the Greeks in different abbreviations, they never used it in a Christian context. It was Constantine who, for the first time, used it as a Christian symbol.⁵ That its meaning was universally understood to be Christian is shown by the fact that under Julian the Apostate it was abolished.

Arriving near Rome with a much smaller army than that of his enemy, Constantine prepared to attack the old city in spite of the advice of his generals, in spite of the counsel of the augurs. Lactantius recounts that at this time

² *The Cambridge Medieval History*, volume I, p. 4.

³ This is not a proof that Constantius was a Christian, but at that time there were similarities between the Christians and monotheist pagans.

⁴ Eusebius in *The Life of Constantine describes labarum* as he could see him on the helmet of the emperor: "A tall pole plated with gold had a transverse bar forming the shape of cross. Up at the extreme top a wreath woven of precious stones and gold had been fastened. On it two letters, intimating by its first characters the name of Christ, formed the monogram of the Saviour's title, rho being intersected in the middle by chi." See Book I, trans. Averil Cameron, Stuart G. Hall, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999) p. 81. See also Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, trans. J. Moreau, Sources Chrétiennes, 39, (Paris, Editions du Cerf), p.126.

⁵ A.H.M Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, (London, English Universities Press, 1948) p. 97.

Maxentius was confined in the city by the predictions of the oracles, which announced his death if he stepped out of Rome.² However, when Constantine was at the walls of the city the people urged Maxentius to do something. Together with his generals he consulted the oracles and found out that on that day the enemy of the Romans would die. Therefore, he took the decision to go out of the walls of Rome and fight himself against Constantine. In this battle he found his death, he was precipitated by the multitude in the Tiber when he wanted to go back into the city. His head was sent to the legions from Africa as proof that Maxentius was dead. Constantine was proclaimed by the Senate and by the people as the new senior Augustus.

Let us stop for a while and look back at the episode of Constantine's vision of the cross and of his dream of Christ. For Eusebius and Lactantius the belief that nothing in this world happens by chance,³ led them to accept without suspicion the story of the emperor. They thought that the conversion of Constantine was definitely the work of God, just as a few years before, the great persecution was perceived God's punishment for the Christians, who enjoying too much peace had begun to quarrel amongst themselves.

Modern historians would never consider God or Christ the cause of an historic event. If an event cannot be attributed to human's causes and if rational causes for its happening could not be discovered they would conclude that it had happened by chance. Therefore, never being satisfied with the arguments and the divine justification given by Eusebius and Lactantius, they would advance arguments that are more rational for this unexpected event.

Their first step was to remember Constantine's attitude towards Christians before his *metanoia*. In his family, there were some traces of Christianity, but nothing could be proved for sure. His father, Constantius, separated from Helena and married a second wife Theodora. One of their children was called Anastasia which meaning "resurrection" was a very significant name for a Christian.⁴ He also refused during the Great Persecution to carry out the bloody edicts against the Christians in the West. Constantine himself long before the defeat of Maxentius had granted full toleration to the Christians.⁵ He also had at his court a bishop, Hossius of Corduba. But in spite of all these

² Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, p.126.

³ In the Book IX of *The History of the Church*, (New York, Penguin Books, 1965), p. 367-368, we can read the following: " At the end of all this, when God, the great and heavenly Defender of Christians, had by such means displayed his wrath as warning to all men in return for the cruel wrongs they had done us, He again restored us kindly, cheering radiance of His providence towards us. As if in black darkness, He most wonderfully illumined us with the light of peace from Himself, making it plain to all that God himself had been watching over us throughout: at first He had scourged His people, and by severe trials had in due time corrected them; then again, after sufficient chastisement, He had shown Himself gracious kind to all whose hopes were fixed on Him".

⁴ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, (London, Viking, 1991) p. 611.

⁵ A.H.M, Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, p. 80.

proofs of his familiarity with Christianity during the period preceding the campaign against Maxentius, there is no sign that he was a Christian or that he showed any particular interest in this religion.

We knew he worshipped Hercules and the Unconquered Sun. Therefore, like all the Romans of his time, he was a very religious person, and was convinced that his success as emperor depended on his relationship with the gods. This belief was not unusual, it was a traditional characteristic of the Roman people, which did not arrive to build an empire from a little peninsula only through order and discipline. The Roman's Empire growth was partly due to the religious commitment of its people. I think that from this point of view, Constantine was a true Roman, a man of his time. We see the other emperors, Diocletian, Galerius, Maxentius, all sacrificing to the gods, consulting oracles, trusting their gods, capable of human sacrifices for making the gods to respond to their prayers. Direct contact with the divinity was something that everybody believed in. The ambiguity of Constantine's behaviour before and after the victory at Milvian Bridge has led the scholars to doubt that this was really a true conversion, a true "Damascus", in his case. Changing the cult of Hercules to that of the Unconquered Sun and later to the belief in Christ, and identifying the last two gods,² is enough proof for some scholars that it was not true conversion to Christianity. Add to this the fact that he was baptised on his death bed by an Arian bishop, Eusebius of Nicomedia and one will have a clear picture of the detractors' accusations. Moreover, as A.H.M. Jones explains, although he was surrounded by Christian bishops even before his conversion, he received no instruction in the new faith and he seems to have developed his own ideas about how he should relate to the Christian God, and these were of course, very Roman and therefore very pagan. The policy of *do ut des* was not removed after his conversion.

From Constantine's letters and edicts he seems to have been convinced that granting liberties to the Christians and to the priests of the cult of the Supreme Divinity would preserve a good relationship with God. In one of his letters sent to the proconsul Anullinus in Africa, immediately after being proclaimed Augustus by the Senate, we can see that he believed that the worship of God by the Christian Church is of maxim importance for the well being of the Empire. Therefore he writes that the Christian priests must be "kept immune from all public burdens of any kind whatever, so that they may not be diverted by any sacrilegious error or slip from the service which is owed to the Divinity, but may rather without any disturbance serve their own law, since their conduct of the greatest worship towards the Divinity will (...) bring immeasurable benefit to the commonwealth".³

² A.H.M, Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, p. 100. Constantine continues to call the seventh day of the week "the day of the venerable Sun" and not "Lord's day", according to the Christian customs.

³ See A.H.M, Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, p. 83.

It must be remembered after this passage that one of the arguments of the pagans for the persecution of the Christians was that by their refusal to worship the gods the latter would no longer favour the Roman people. The opinion of Constantine is that the persecution of the Church has brought the empire into peril. The terms are the same, only the perspective changed. Everything turns upon the Christian Church, upon which depends the welfare of the Empire. Confronted with this kind of evidence the conversion of Constantine to Christianity cannot be denied. If it took some time for the emperor and the Romans to renounce the forms of the pagan cult that they applied to the new Christian cult, it is of less importance. Whoever nowadays will assist in one of the religious processions in Latin America, will discover that they have little in common with the Catholic world as they used to know it in Europe. Nevertheless, these people are Christian Catholic. The stereotypes of the old civilisation made only this transformation of *paideia* and the acceptance of the new religion easier. Constantine's benefactions to the Church were on a large scale. The ravages of the persecution he made good by financing new editions of the Bible, by building churches at the traditional shrines, such as those of St. apostles Paul and Peter in the Holy Land and the Holy Sepulchre. He assigned a fixed proportion of revenues so large that even when cut to a third after the suspension during Julian's reign, it was still reckoned generous.

Another deep conviction of the emperor was that the welfare of his empire was dependent on the unity of the Church of God. The Church was divided in the West between the Donatists and the Catholics, and in Egypt the followers of Meletius had begun to organise a church of their own.² Arriving to Constantinople the emperor expected to find much more unity, but the Church had to face at that time the Arian controversy.³ In his attitude towards the dispute between the Catholics and the Donatists he deplored the schism because it prejudiced Christianity in the eyes of the pagan world. In his speech at the council of Nicaea he underlined the same ideas: "For truly it would be a terrible thing that now when wars are ended and no one dares to offer further resistance we should begin to attack each other and thus to give cause for pleasure and laughter to the pagan world".⁴

Therefore from this letters and speeches we discover a Constantine preoccupied by the image of the Christian world in the eyes of the pagans, worried for the unity of the Christian Church on which depends the well-being of his empire. He acted because he was convinced that he had to accomplish a mission that was entrusted to him by God Himself.

No one will ever be able to prove what happened before the battle of the Milvian Bridge or if Constantine saw Christ himself in his dream. It will

² Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians and the Christian Church*, p. 609.

³ Norman, H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 19.

⁴ Norman, H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church*, p. 27.

remain a matter of belief, and belief cannot be demonstrated, because demonstration is the death of all belief. But we can affirm together with Henry Chadwick that even if his conversion should not be interpreted as “an inward experience of grace, neither was it a cynical act of machiavellian cunning”. It is true that Constantine underwent a capital change, and that henceforth he became a Christian, his faith being the pillar on which he built the new Christian Roman Empire. His behaviour was both one of an emperor and one of a Christian.

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КОНСТАНТИНОВО ПРЕОБРАЋЕЊЕ

Када се говори о Константиновом преобраћењу требало би сагледати два супротстављена становишта Константинове егзегезе. С једне стране, примарне изворе, оличене на првом месту у сведочанствима царевих савременика, Лактанцију и Јевсевију Кесаријском, који говоре о правом преобраћењу римског императора у хришћанство и, са друге стране у много нијансиранијем становишту савремених научника који се крећу од безрезервног прихватања његовог преобраћења до одбацивања ове чињенице. Покушаћемо у нашем саопштењу да ставимо једно на супрот другом два становишта, једно античко и једно модерно, као и разлоге за и против Константиновог преобраћења, сагледавајући овај догађај и његове интерпретације у оквиру две херменеутичке парадигме, једне религиозне и засноване на традицији и друге такозване објективне која своје корене има у позитивизму 19. века. Покушаћемо да у овом саопштењу дамо аргументе у прилог истинском Константиновом преобраћењу поткрепљујући то становиште царским посланицама издатим после 313. године.