

Constantine The Great and Christianity

AUGUST 24, 2016 SHAWN T. NORRIS – ROME ACROSS EUROPE

Of the reasons the [Roman Empire](#) endured as long as it did, there are two things that stand out: The [Romans](#) relied heavily upon tradition and history, but they were also able to adapt and incorporate new ideas or concepts into their lives.

The idea of tradition and incorporating something new into said tradition in a single moment can be shown with [Roman Emperor Constantine the Great](#) and [Christianity](#).

While Emperor Constantine reigned (306–337 AD), Christianity began to transition to the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. Historians remain uncertain about Constantine’s reasons for favoring Christianity, but theologians and historians have argued about which form of [Early Christianity](#) he subscribed to.



There is no consensus among scholars as to whether he adopted his mother [Helena](#)’s Christianity in his youth, or (as claimed by [Eusebius of Caesarea](#)) encouraged her to convert to the faith himself. Some scholars question the extent to which he should be considered a Christian Emperor.



“Constantine saw himself as an ‘Emperor of the Christian people’. If this made him a Christian is the subject of ... debate.”, although he allegedly received a [baptism](#) shortly before his death.

Constantine’s decision to cease the [persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire](#) was a turning point for Early Christianity, sometimes referred to as the Triumph of the Church, the [Peace of the Church](#) or the [Constantinian Shift](#). In AD 313, Constantine and [Licinius](#) issued the [Edict of Milan](#) decriminalizing Christian worship.

The Emperor became a great patron of the [Church](#) and set a precedent for the position of the Christian Emperor within the Church and the notion of [orthodoxy](#), [Christendom](#), [ecumenical councils](#) and the [state church of the Roman Empire](#) declared in AD 380 by the [Edict of Thessalonica](#). He is revered as a [Saint](#) and [Aequalis Apostolis](#) in the [Eastern Orthodox Church](#) and [Oriental Orthodox Church](#) for his example as a “Christian monarch”

History of Persecution

The first recorded official persecution of Christians on behalf of the Roman Empire was in AD 64, when, as reported by the [Roman historian Tacitus](#), Emperor [Nero](#) attempted to blame Christians for the [Great Fire of Rome](#). According to Church tradition, it was during the reign of Nero that [Peter](#) and [Paul](#) were martyred in [Rome](#).

Modern historians have debated whether the Roman government distinguished between Christians and Jews prior to Nerva's modification of the Fiscus Judaicus in AD 96. It was at this point which practicing Jews paid the tax and Christians did not.



Christians suffered from sporadic and localized persecutions over a period of 250 years. Their refusal to participate in Imperial Cult was considered an act of treason and was thus punishable by execution.

The most widespread official persecution was carried out by Diocletian. During the Great Persecution (AD 303–311), the Emperor ordered Christian buildings and the homes of Christians torn down and their sacred books collected and burned.



Christians were arrested, tortured, mutilated, burned, starved, and condemned to gladiatorial contests to amuse spectators. The Great Persecution officially ended in April 311 AD, when Galerius, Senior Emperor of the Tetrarchy, issued an Edict of Toleration granting Christians the right to practice their religion, though it did not restore any property to them.

Constantine, Caesar in the Western Empire and Licinius, Caesar in the East, also were signatories to the Edict of Toleration. It has been speculated that Galerius' reversal of his long-standing policy of Christian persecution has been

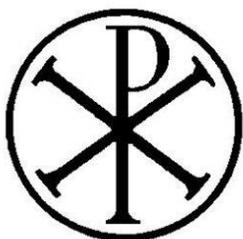
attributable to one or both of these co-*Caesares*.

No matter if Constantine's mother, Helena, exposed him to Christianity or not, he only declared himself a Christian after issuing the Edict of Milan. Writing to Christians, Constantine made clear that he believed that he owed his successes the protection of that High God alone.

Eusebius of Caesarea and other Christian sources record that Constantine experienced a dramatic event in AD 312 at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, after which Constantine claimed the emperorship in the West.



According to these sources, Constantine looked up to the sun before the battle and saw a cross of light above it, and with it the Greek words *Ἐν Τούτῳ Νικά* (In this sign, conquer!), often rendered in a Latin version, *In hoc signo vinces* (In this sign, you will conquer).



Constantine commanded his troops to adorn their shields with a Christian symbol (the Chi-Rho) to distinguish them from the Roman soldiers of Maxentius. Thereafter, Constantine's soldiers with the sign of God were victorious.

Following the battle, the new Emperor ignored the altars to the gods prepared on the Capitoline Hill and did not carry out the customary sacrifices to celebrate a General's victorious entry into Rome. Constantine instead headed directly to the imperial palace to give thanks there.

Most influential people in the Empire had not been converted to Christianity and still participated in the [traditional religions of Rome](#), so his actions were looked upon with hesitation. Constantine's rule exhibited at least a willingness to appease these factions.

The [Roman coins](#) minted up to 8 years after the battle still bore the images of Roman gods. The monuments first commissioned by Constantine, such as the [Arch of Constantine](#), contained no reference to Christianity.

In AD 313, Constantine and Licinius announced "that it was proper that the Christians and all others should have liberty to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared best". A tolerance was thereby granted to all religions, including Christianity.



The Edict of Milan went a step further than the earlier Edict of Toleration by Galerius in AD 311, returning property which had been confiscated back to the Church. This edict made the Empire officially neutral with regard to religious worship.

For the first time in Rome's history neither the traditional religions nor Christianity were the [state religion](#), there was simply religious tolerance. The Edict of Milan did, however, raise the stock of Christianity within the Empire and it reaffirmed the importance of religious worship to the welfare of the state.

The accession of Constantine was a turning point for Early Christianity. After his victory, Constantine took over the role of patron of the Christian faith.

He supported the Church financially, had an extraordinary number of [basilicas](#) built, granted privileges (e.g., exemption from certain taxes) to clergy, promoted Christians to high-ranking offices, returned property confiscated during the Great Persecution of Diocletian, and endowed the Church with land and other wealth.

Between AD 324 and 330, Constantine built a new imperial capital at [Byzantium](#) on the [Bosporos](#), which would be named [Constantinople](#) for him. Unlike "old" Rome, the city began to employ overtly Christian architecture, contained churches within the city walls and had no pre-existing temples from other religions.

In doing this, however, Constantine required those who had not converted to Christianity to pay for the new city. Christian chroniclers tell that it appeared necessary to Constantine "to teach his subjects to give up their rites (...) and to accustom them to despise their temples and the images contained therein."



This led to the closure of temples because of a lack of support, their wealth flowing to the imperial treasure. Constantine did not need to use force to implement this action however.



Many times imperial favor was granted to Christianity by the Edict. New avenues were opened to Christians, including the right to compete with other Romans in the traditional *Cursus Honorum* for high government positions, and greater acceptance into general civil society.

Constantine respected cultivated persons, and his court was composed of older, respected, and honored men. Although denied positions of power, men from leading Roman families who declined to convert to Christianity still received appointments and held 2/3 of the top cabinet positions.

Constantine's laws enforced and reflected his Christian attitudes. Crucifixion was abolished for reasons of Christian piety, but was replaced with hanging, to demonstrate the preservation of Roman supremacy.

Sunday established as day of rest

On 7 March 321 AD, Sunday, already sacred to Christians and to the Roman Sun God *Sol Invictus*, was declared an official day of rest. On that day markets were banned and public offices were closed, except for the purpose of freeing slaves. There were, however, no restrictions on performing farming work on Sundays. This was the work of the great majority of the population anyhow, so it did not sense to cease this work.

Some laws made during the reign of Constantine were even humane in the modern sense, possibly inspired by his Christianity. For example, a prisoner was no longer to be kept in total darkness but must be given the outdoors and daylight; and a condemned man was allowed to die in the arena, but he could not be branded on his "heavenly beautified" face, since God was supposed to have made man in his image, but only on the feet.

In AD 331, Constantine commissioned Eusebius to deliver 50 Bibles for the Church of Constantinople. Athanasius recorded around AD 340 Alexandrian scribes preparing Bibles for Constans.

It has been speculated that this may have provided motivation for canon lists, and that Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus are examples of these Bibles. Together with the Peshitta and Codex Alexandrinus, these are the earliest extant Christian Bibles.



The reign of Constantine established a precedent for the position of the Christian Emperor in the Church. Emperors considered themselves responsible to the gods for the spiritual health of their subjects, and after Constantine they had a duty to help the Church define orthodoxy and maintain orthodoxy.

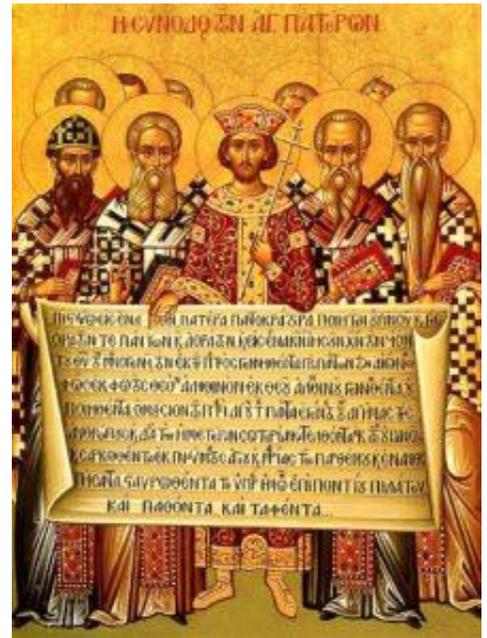
The Church generally regarded the definition of doctrine as the responsibility of the Bishops, along with what proper worship (orthodoxy), doctrines and dogma consisted of. It was the Emperor's role to enforce doctrine, root out heresy, uphold ecclesiastical unity, and ensure that God was properly worshiped in his Empire.

Constantine had become a worshiper of the Christian God, but he found that there were many opinions on that worship and indeed on who and what that God was. In AD 316, Constantine was asked to adjudicate in a [North African](#) dispute between the [Donatist](#) sect.

More significantly, in AD 325 he summoned the [First Council of Nicaea](#). This was the foremost [Ecumenical Council](#), unless the [Council of Jerusalem](#) is so classified.

The Council of Nicaea is the first major attempt by Christians to define orthodoxy for the whole Church. Until Nicaea, all previous Church Councils had been local or regional synods affecting only portions of the Church.

Nicaea dealt primarily with the [Arian](#) controversy. Constantine himself was torn between the Arian and [Trinitarian](#) camps. After the Nicene council, and against its conclusions, Constantine eventually recalled [Arius](#) from exile. He then subsequently banished [Athanasius of Alexandria](#) to [Trier](#).



Constantine's baptism

Just before his death in May 337 AD, Constantine was baptized into Christianity. Up until this time he had been a [Catechumen](#) for most of his adult life.



He believed that if he waited to get baptized on his death bed he was in less danger of polluting his soul with sin and not getting to heaven. He was baptized by an Arian sympathizer, but this was a result of attempting to create reconciliation in the Church, not acceptance of Arianism.

He was baptized by his distant relative Arian Bishop [Eusebius of Nicomedia](#). During Eusebius of Nicomedia's time in the Imperial court, the Eastern court and the major positions in the Eastern Church were held by Arians or Arian sympathizers.

With the exception of a short period of eclipse, Eusebius enjoyed the complete confidence both of Constantine and [Constantius II](#) and was the tutor of Emperor [Julian the Apostate](#). After Constantine's death, his son and successor Constantius II was an Arian, as was Emperor [Valens](#).

Constantine's position on the religions traditionally practiced in Rome evolved during his reign. At first Constantine encouraged the construction of new temples and tolerated traditional sacrifices, but by the end of his reign he had begun to order the plundering and tearing down of [Roman temples](#).

Beyond the [limes](#), east of the [Euphrates](#), the [Sassanid](#) rulers of the [Persian Empire](#), perennially at war with [Rome](#), had usually [tolerated Christianity](#). Constantine is said to have written to [Shapur II](#) in AD 324 and urged him to protect Christians under his rule.

With the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, Christians in Persia would be regarded as allies of Persia's ancient enemy. According to an anonymous Christian account, Shapur II wrote to his generals:

You will arrest Simon, chief of the Christians. You will keep him until he signs this document and consents to collect for us a double tax and double tribute from the Christians ... for Our Godhead have all the trials of war and they have nothing but repose and pleasure. They inhabit our territory and agree with Caesar, our enemy. — Shapur II, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500*

The “Great Persecution” of the Persian Christian churches occurred between AD 340-363, after the Persian Wars that reopened upon Constantine's death.

Constantinian Shift is a term used by [Anabaptist](#) and [Post-Christendom](#) theologians to describe the political and theological aspects of Constantine's legalization of Christianity in the 4th Century. The term was popularized by the [Mennonite](#) theologian [John H. Yoder](#).

Previously we have shared more on the life of Constantine, but you can see here that religion was a huge impact on his life. That the religion of Constantine was Christianity was simply another way in establishing this new religion for centuries to come.

We hope you enjoyed today's journey and look forward to having you back again. Remember to stop on by soon to see what else we have in store for you.

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