

THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF  
CONSTANTINE I, THE GREAT

by

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## ABSTRACT

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The year 325 A.D. was the most critical year in the lives of Constantine I, the Great and the Christian Church. This was the year that Constantine called together the first major Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, to discuss the many christological questions which had been under discussion by the Christian leaders for the last two centuries. The fact that a Roman emperor was responsible for bringing about this synod was of major significance, since this was an unprecedented act. This was a turning point in the history of the Church, in that, from this point on the Christian Church became the state religion of the Empire and the major religious force in the Roman Empire.

The year 325 A.D. was also the year which showed a distinct change in Constantine's religious character. Before 325, although Constantine had shown to be friendly towards the Christians, in that he allowed them freedom of religion, he in no way had shown to have been a converted Christian. His religious affiliation prior to 325 is questionable. Though his Christian authors depict him to have been converted in 312 A.D., more reliable sources show him to have been an advocate of religious freedom more than a converted Christian.

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After 325, however, his entire religious character changed from one of religious toleration for all religions in the Empire, to one of favoring only the Christians. First, Constantine called together the Council of Nicaea (325) and presided over it, as the Christian bishops discussed the problems of the Church. Then, throughout his reign, he continuously asked the Christian bishops to settle their problems and unite into one Church. At the same time his policy of religious toleration ceased as he began a policy of religious persecution against the Jews and pagans in the Empire. Finally, in 337 A.D. while on his deathbed received baptism. His reason for receiving baptism just before his death was so that he might be cleansed of all sins that he may have committed during his lifetime and not run the risk of committing any subsequent sins during the period between baptism and death.

The year 325 is not only important with regard to Constantine's religious character and the emergence of the Church as the state religion of Rome, but it is also important, in that it culminated an evolution within the Christian Church. This evolutionary process which began with St. Paul, who changed Christianity from a national to an international religion, ended in 325 A.D. Before 325 the Christian Church, although its organization had changed to a far more complex institution than the first century brethren communities, it was still a pacifistic religion. Before 325 the Christians were still the hated group in the Empire and one which was persecuted.

After 325, however, with the change in Constantine's religious policy, the Church ceased to be pacifistic and ceased to be the persecuted religion. Instead, the Church took an aggressive attitude towards other religions and became the persecutor. Where at one time they were the persecuted, the

Christians had become the persecutors of the one time persecutors, and religious toleration ceased to exist once more in the Roman world.

The pacifistic philosophy of the early Christians had disappeared, as the fourth century Christian bishops took to the offensive. They first accepted Constantine as their champion, who supposedly saw a sign of the cross in 312, and the words telling him to conquer in the name of the Lord. In this case the acceptance of such a man, and the acceptance of violence shows a tremendous change in the philosophy of the fourth century Christians from the early Christians. Secondly, the enforcement of religious persecution against non Christians by Constantine, and the acceptance of such actions by the Christians of the fourth century also shows a major change in the philosophy of the fourth century Christian Church. Was Constantine a Christian? Not if one compares him to the early Christians. He was a Christian, however, in the fourth century, and a Christian of his time, if one compares him to the Christians of the fourth century.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper will be to describe the religious character of Constantine I, the Great (272? - 337 A.D.). This is an extremely difficult problem since the sources that have survived from the fourth century are of questionable credibility.

The most notable authority on the life of Constantine is Eusebius (ab. 260-340),<sup>1</sup> bishop of Caesaria, and personal friend and admirer of Constantine. Eusebius', Historia Ecclesiastica, his Vita Constantini, and his DeLaudibus Constantini<sup>2</sup> are the three major works which have survived in relation to the first Christian emperor, Constantine. Although, Eusebius is an excellent primary source, it appears that his overzealous attempt to make his Emperor Constantine a most pious and virtuous Christian caused him to exaggerate on occasions, and on occasions even to totally falsefy material.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Eusebius should be read with great discretion and at points where he has exceeded his authority as an objective historian, disregarded.

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<sup>1</sup>For further reading on the life of Eusebius, with an excellent bibliography see "Prolegomena" to The Church History of Eusebius, by Rev. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, found in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church series, Vol. I, trans. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), pp. 1-72.

<sup>2</sup>The English translations of these works are included in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers...; see above note #1.

<sup>3</sup>The exaggerating and falsefied material of Eusebius will be pointed out later on in the paper.

The second primary source which has survived from the fourth century is another contemporary of Constantine, Lactantius (ab. 313-314). Lactantius, an African historian and convert to Christianity, who later became the tutor of Crispus, the son of Constantine, has left one document in relation to Constantine entitled, "De mortibus persecutorum."<sup>4</sup> Lactantius, a Christian himself, has also attempted to portray Constantine as a most pious Christian, and a man chosen by God to give Christianity its place as the religion of man. Despite the exaggerations of Lactantius, "De mortibus persecutorum" is an excellent first hand account of Constantine's struggle for power. Eusebius and Lactantius are the two chief contemporary Christian authors of Constantine, and together they provide a wealth of material in the life of this complex historical figure, Constantine.

Other Christian writers who mention Constantine are Athanasius (296-373), bishop of Alexandria, in whose "Apology against the Aryans,"<sup>5</sup> and various other works, contain certain letters of Constantine and is an excellent primary source. Socrates Scholasticus (b. ab. 408) in his Ecclesiastical History<sup>6</sup> mentions Constantine, but sheds little light in comparison to Eusebius.

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<sup>4</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus persecutorum," trans. by Rev. Wm. Fletcher, D.D., in Ante-Nicene Fathers series, Vol. VII, edited by Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), pp. 301-22.

<sup>5</sup>Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, Select Writings and Letters, edited with Prolegomena, indices, and tables by Archibald Robertson, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, second series Vol. IV, translated into English with Prolegomena and explanatory notes, under the editorial supervision of Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957).

<sup>6</sup>Socrates Scholasticus, The Ecclesiastical History from A.D. 305-439, by the Rev. A.C. Zenos, D.D., found in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. II (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957).

Sozomen's (b. ab. 400) Ecclesiastical History,<sup>7</sup> and Theodoret's (b. ab. 393?-452?) Ecclesiastical History,<sup>8</sup> also mention Constantine, but these men have little to offer with respect to the religious convictions of Constantine, other than the fact that they present him to be an isapostolos. There are many other Christian writers as will be mentioned later, but the above are the chief authors of Constantine, with Eusebius and Lactantius at the head of the list.

There are also other contemporaries of Constantine who have written on some part of his life and are of great value, namely the pagans Eutropius (4th Century),<sup>9</sup> secretary to Constantine; and Ammianus Marcellinus (d. ab. 345).<sup>10</sup> These two men deal with historical accounts during the reign of Constantine, as opposed to the Christian writers who wrote only to show that Constantine was a true man of God.

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<sup>7</sup> Sozomenus, Ecclesiastical History From A.D. 323-425, by Chester D. Hartranft, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. II (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> Theodoret, Ecclesiastical History, Dialogues, and Letters, Translated by Rev. Blomfield Jackson, found in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company 1957).

<sup>9</sup> Eutropius, Abridgment of Roman History, English translation in Rev. John Selby Watson's, Justin, Cornelius Nepos, and Eutropius (York Street, London: Henry G. Bahn, 1853). Section relating to Constantine in Bk. X, pp. 527-31.

<sup>10</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, Histories, in three volumes, trans. by John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964). The first thirteen books which include the section on Constantine are extant, but he mentions Constantine in his other books, as will be seen later.

Among the modern historians the debate is still going on, as to whether Constantine adopted Christianity out of true belief as described by Eusebius, or as a brilliant political maneuver as advocated by Jacob Burckhardt.<sup>11</sup> Historians of the nineteenth century held that Constantine's motives for adopting Christianity were strictly political, and that he did so only to pursue his own selfish ends. Barthold G. Niebuhr, for example, makes this assertion when he describes Constantine as "a repulsive figure in whom Christianity and paganism were mingled, a superstitious man who pursued his own selfish ends."<sup>12</sup>

Jacob Burckhardt later declared that Constantine was only an ambitious individual whose lust for power resulted in his adoption of Christianity.

Burckhardt declares that,

In a genius driven without surcease by ambition and lust for power, there can be no question of Christianity and paganism, of conscious religiosity, or irreligiosity; such a man is essentially unreligious, even if he pictures himself standing in the midst of a churchly community.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>For secondary reading on Constantine, see: Jacob Burckhardt, The Age of Constantine the Great, trans. by Moses Hadas (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949); Herman Doerries, Constantine the Great, trans. by Robert Bainton (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972); Andrew Alföldi, The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome trans. by Harold Mattingly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948); Norman H. Baynes, Constantine the Great and the Christian Church, Proceedings of the British Academy, 1929; Raleigh lecture on history March 12, 1930 (London: 1930); Ramsay MacMullen, Constantine (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970); Lloyd B. Holsapple, Constantine the Great (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942); Arnold Hugh Martin Jones, Constantine and the Conversion of Europe (London: the English University Press, 1965); George Philip Baker, Constantine the Great and the Christian Revolution (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967); John Holland Smith, Constantine the Great (New York: Scribner, 1971); Hermann Doerries, Constantine and Religious Liberty, trans. by Roland H. Bainton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

<sup>12</sup>Barthold G. Niebuhr, Lectures on the History of Rome, third edition, Vol. III, trans. by Havilland Le M. Chempell and F.C. Demmler (London: Henry G. Bonn, 1852), p. 318.

<sup>13</sup>Jacob Burckhardt, The Age of Constantine the Great, p. 292.

During the current century, however, research has led to a new theory on Constantine's religious convictions. It is held by contemporary historians<sup>14</sup> that Constantine was indeed a Christian, and this conclusion has been reached after studying Constantine's actions towards the Church. It is this theory which this paper will attempt to prove, although there cannot be any definite and conclusive views.

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<sup>14</sup>A.H.M. Jones, Constantine and the Conversion of Europe, concludes that Constantine's motives were Christian in nature, and that he revealed them through his actions in favor of the Church. L.B. Holsapple, Constantine the Great, agrees with Jones, and he basis his theory on the fact that Constantine at first was satisfied at giving Christianity an equal status with other religions, but later in his life he took "...a clear advance towards special reference for his fellow-religionists..." p. 425. Ramsay MacMullen, Constantine, considers Constantine's actions towards the Christians as being totally sincere, and that he delayed baptism till the eve of his death, because he did not want "...to lose its effects by subsequent sin; but Constantine had put it off in hopes, of receiving it in the waters of Jordan." p. 223. Andrew Alföldi, The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome, concludes that "...authentic documents, and at least equally authentic, purely official, issues of coins supply us with absolute proof that the Emperor embraced the Christian cause with a suddenness that surprised all but his closest intimates," p.2. With regard to Constantine's baptism Alföldi says that, "...when death drew high, received baptism, following the custom of the age, in order to be freed from his sins by the ceremony of baptism and so enter Paradise," p. 115. The most profound piece of work concerning Constantine's religious convictions has been done by Norman H. Baynes, Constantine the Great and the Christian Church. In it, Baynes contends that, although "...by 311 A.D. the imperial policy of persecution of the Christians had been proven a failure...it could not carry with it the implication that it was the duty of a Roman Emperor so far to disavow Rome's past as himself to adopt the faith professed by perhaps one-tenth<sup>a</sup> of his subjects," pp. 1-2. Baynes concludes that Constantine's religious policy towards the Christians proves him to be a Christian, and contends further, that "...the prosperity of the Roman state was intimately...linked to the cause of unity within the Catholic Church.<sup>b</sup> Here, I believe, is to be found the determining factor in the religious policy of the emperor,---his aim was ever to establish unity in the Catholic Church," p. 27.

<sup>a</sup>With regard to this estimate Baynes says, that "...this fraction is nothing more than a guess, and is here used simply as such: For the consideration of the materials upon which any conjectural estimate must be based, see Adolf Harnack, The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries, trans. by James Moffatt (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, Harper and Row, 1972)," pp. 73-83.

<sup>b</sup>On the subject of Constantine's continuous attempts to unite the Catholic Church see: Eusebius, Vita Constantini.

Burckhardt and his constituents have relied heavily on the theory that because coin inscriptions read SOLI • INVICTO • COMITI, ---a personification of the Sun as Mithras, Constantine regarded Christ as merely one of the gods.<sup>15</sup> The constant appearance of non-Christian gods, along with the Christian emblem, has led Burckhardt to believe, that Constantine was not a religious man, but one who used every means within his grasp to secure his imperial rule. Of Constantine's baptism Burckhardt totally disregards and merely states: "...of Constantine's profession of Christianity and his deathbed baptism, every man must judge according to his own criteria."<sup>16</sup>

It appears that Burckhardt has taken Constantine's religion too lightly. In rejecting all of Constantine's religious beliefs, he has gone too far, and although Constantine's baptism came late in his life, this does not exclude him from rightly being categorized as a Christian. It also appears evident that Burckhardt has not set a clear definition of what, in his opinion, is a Christian. Before any conclusions could be reached about whether a man is a Christian or not, certain criteria must be established as to what a Christian is.

When a Roman Catholic priest was asked the question "What is a Christian?" he replied that "once one has accepted Christ." "Baptism," he said, "is not a requirement to being a Christian, but rather a requirement of the Church for participation in Church sacraments--confession, holy communion, etc."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Burckhardt, The Age of Const., p. 293.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>17</sup> This answer was given to me on a personal interview, by Rev. Frederick Monteiro, M.S.F.S., of Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church, Route 91 in Tallmadge, Ohio, on June 18, 1974, at 2:30 p.m.

When the same question was put to a Baptist pastor, his answer was that "one is a Christian who has by faith accepted Jesus Christ, and has committed himself to Jesus as Lord and Saviour...Baptism is not necessary, for it is only a requirement placed upon the people by the Church."<sup>18</sup> The determining factor to the definition of a Christian, currently seems to be "acceptance of Christ as the Saviour."<sup>19</sup>

Can one declare Constantine a Christian, therefore, by applying the above definition? In one sense the answer to the question is yes; and yet, in another sense it is no. Firstly, Constantine's actions towards the Christians, as will be seen later, and his baptism show him to be a Christian. In another sense, however, Constantine's entire attitude of protecting and preserving Christianity through the use of the sword, shows him to be anything but a Christian. "Acceptance of Christ" does not merely mean what is meant in its literary form, but rather along with the acceptance of Christ comes the responsibility of following the teachings of Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

Constantine could not have been and was not a Christian as described by Jesus. Constantine was a creature and a Christian of his

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<sup>18</sup>This answer was given to me on a personal interview on June 19, 1974 at 1:00 p.m. by Pastor David Bryant of The Grace Baptist Church, Route 59, Kent, Ohio.

<sup>19</sup>The definitions of Rev. Monteiro and David Bryant are very similar and although they cannot be considered as final authorities on the subject, nevertheless they do shed some light.

<sup>20</sup>Such responsibilities were not carried out by Constantine, as will be seen later in Chapter IV.

time. He was a Christian of the insitutionalized fourth century Christian Church, and not a model Christian taken out of the New Testament. This can be seen easily when one studies the history of Christianity from its beginning to the fourth century, and what transpired within that period, which gave reason for an individual such as Constantine to behave in the manner which he did.

Alvin Boyd Kuhn in his book Shadow of the Third Century, reveals that "...what has passed under the name of Christianity is not and really has never been Christianity at all."<sup>21</sup> Kuhn's thesis is the distinction which he makes between "Christianity" and what he calls "Christianism." He remarks that "Christianity" has always existed, but the "...movement which sprang to life in the first and second centuries A.D.," he asserts, "the more properly suggestive name of Christianism."<sup>22</sup>

Kuhn insists that the Church took the name Christians not from the man "Christ" but, "from the Greek Christos, the Anointed, which never in all previous time borne a reference to a historical personage, but only to a divine conscious mind coming to manifestation slowly in mankind or in human nature."<sup>23</sup> Instead, Kuhn says, the name Christians was adopted permanently from the Pagan and "Hellenistic philosophico-religious cultism"

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<sup>21</sup> Alvin Boyd Kuhn, Shadow of the Third Century: A Revaluation of Christianity (Elizabeth, N.J.: Academy Press, 1949), p. xi, Preface. Kuhn in this work presents an excellent study of Christianity and how it has changed through time, a view which I support.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 333.

of Antioch, which was practiced by Essene<sup>24</sup> Communities, as well as the Nazarenes, Naasenes and Christians before the founding of Christianity.<sup>25</sup> In short, Kuhn says, that the name Christians is a historical name, and a pagan name.

Adolf Harnack, in his book What is Christianity?, exclaims that Christianity evolved to the point where "primitive Christianity had to disappear in order that Christianity might remain; and in the same way in later ages one metamorphosis followed upon another."<sup>26</sup> Harnack's thesis is that for the Church to develop to the extent which it had by the fourth century, the old order had to be replaced by a new one. St. Paul's declaration of "circumcision of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter;" as opposed to "circumcision of the flesh"<sup>27</sup> as practiced by the Jews, is an evolutionary idea within the Christian Church of the first and second centuries, totally different from that taught by St. Peter.

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<sup>24</sup>These were communities who were closely united in brotherhood--brethren--much like the Christian communities which followed. Josephus mentions the Essenes as a Jewish cult and describes them as the Brethren Cult. Flavius Josephus, Works of, with Three Dissertations, trans. by William Whiston, A.M., (Cincinnati: H.S. & J. Applegate, 1850) "Antiquities of the Jews" Bk. XVIII, c. 1, p. 361.

<sup>25</sup>A.B. Kuhn, Shadow of the Third Century, p. 332.

<sup>26</sup>Adolf Harnack, What is Christianity?, trans. by Bailey Saunders (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), p. 14. Lectures delivered at the University of Berlin during the winter-term, 1899-1900.

<sup>27</sup>St. Paul, "Romans", 2:25-29, taken out of The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; according to the Received Greek Text together with the English Authorized Version (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1961), p. 386.

Judaism and Christianity were both monotheistic religions, and both shared the same attitude towards polytheism (the imperial cultus).<sup>28</sup> Whereas Judaism was a national religion, Christianity was an international religion. Where at one time the Gospel was being Taught only to the Hebrews, it eventually evolved with the preachings of Paul to a "Gentile" and an international religion.<sup>29</sup>

Paul's mission was so extensive, that he spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. In "Romans" XV (verses 19-25) Paul remarks:

...From Jerusalem, and round about into Illyricum,<sup>30</sup> I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation: but as it is written, To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see; and they that have not heard shall understand. For which cause also I have been much hindered from coming to you. But now having no more place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come unto you; whensoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you.<sup>31</sup>

The result of Paul's work, the man to whom the founding of the Christian Church is accredited, had evolved by the fourth century to the point where almost every city within the Roman Empire had a Church.<sup>32</sup>

One more point as to how the teachings of Christ changed through the evolution of the Church from the first century to the fourth century can be seen in a statement found in the Gospel of Mark. This statement

<sup>28</sup> A. Harnack, Mission and Expansion..., p.24.

<sup>29</sup> On this point for an excellent discussion see Harnack, Mission and Expansion..., pp. 24-83.

<sup>30</sup> Harnack suggests that the words "round about into Illyricum" mean that Peter's work in preaching the Gospel within the Greek world had ended.

<sup>31</sup> This statement is meant for the Romans, for he is writing from Corinth, telling the Romans that his work in Greece is completed, and that he will now undertake the task of preaching the Gospel to the Latin world.

<sup>32</sup> For an excellent essay on the different locations of Churches see: Harnack's Mission and Expansion..., pp. 445-486.

is in relation to the Roman Emperor, and how Jesus allegedly felt about the Imperial throne, when he was asked:

Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not? Shall we give, or shall we not give? But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, Why tempt ye me? Bring me a penny, that I may see it. And they brought. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Caesar's. And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.<sup>33</sup>

And again in the Gospel of St. John another statement by Jesus, in response to Pilate, when Pilate asked Jesus if he was the King of the Jews he answered: "My Kingdom is not of this world: if my Kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight...."<sup>34</sup>

These two examples, whether they be historically true or not, serve only one purpose, in that the early Christians following the philosophy of Christ refused to fight; and, were not concerned with the imperial rulers of this world, but of the Kingdom in heaven. Yet, by the fourth century Christianity had evolved to the point where a man allegedly claimed to have seen a sign of the cross telling him to conquer--make war--in the name of the Lord, and the Christians of the time fully accepted him, and declared him champion of the Church, Christianity, and Jesus Christ. Constantine may have been the champion of the fourth century Christian Church, but could not have been by any means the champion of Jesus Christ, and the first century Christian Church.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Gospel according to Mark 12:15-17, in the New Testament, English Authorized version (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1961), p. 121.

<sup>34</sup>Gospel of St. John, 18:36, English Authorized version (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1961), p. 284.

<sup>35</sup>This point will be covered later when Constantine's persecutions against the pagans in the Empire are discussed.

The main point to be observed here, therefore, is that Constantine was a Christian of his time, a Christian of the fourth century Church. The main reason for this is that by the fourth century the Church had evolved into a political, social as well as religious institution, far more complex, than the simple brethren community of the Apostolic Age. The pacifism<sup>36</sup> expressed by Jesus, both individually and collectively (war) was lived up to by the Church all the way up to the time of Constantine's alleged "vision of the cross." This pacifism, however, changed immediately and completely after the alleged vision, into one of aggression in the name of Jesus Christ. It is not Constantine who is to blame for the change in the attitudes of the Christians, but rather those who accepted this change, namely the fourth century Christian bishops. This was the new order which Harnack spoke of and said that the old order had to disappear in order to make room for Christianity to survive.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>This was expressed best in Matthew 26:52, when one of Jesus' companions cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant and Jesus replied: "Put up again thy sword in its place; for all they that take the sword shall perish by the sword," p. 76.

<sup>37</sup>On this subject see also: Walter Woodburn Hyde, Paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire (New York: Octagon Books, 1970). See especially his chapter on "The Teachings of Jesus," pp. 146-163. Monsignor Louis Duchesne, Early History of the Church (London, Almemarbe St.: John Murray, 1947), vol. I. A. Harnack, What is Christianity?

## CHAPTER II

## THE EARLY LIFE OF CONSTANTINE (272-305)

The Emperor Flavius Valerius Constantinus, the Great<sup>38</sup> was born on February 27,<sup>39</sup> sometime between the years 272 and 280 A.D. There appears some controversy as to the exact year of Constantine's birth. We do know that he died in 337 A.D., but as to the exact year of his birth we can only go with the accounts as stated by his contemporaries. Eusebius, the biographer of Constantine says, that Constantine reigned for thirty years, "and something more, extending the whole term of his mortal life to twice this number of years."<sup>40</sup> And again, in another statement in which Eusebius compares Constantine to Alexander the Great, who died at age 32,<sup>41</sup> he says

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<sup>38</sup>A portion of his title is given by Ernest Cushing Richardson, Ph.D., in his article "Prolegomena" of Eusebius' Vita Constantini found in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, p. 411, note #2. Richardson has compiled the title from coins, inscriptions and various documents which describe Constantine as "Imperator Caesar Augustus Consul Proconsul Pontifex Maximus, Magnus, Maximus, Pius, Felix, Fidelis, Mansuetus, Beneficus, Clementissimus, Victor, Invictus, Triumphator, Salus Reip. Beticus, Alemanicus, Gothicus, Sarmaticus, Germanicus, Britannicus, Hunnicus, Gallicanus." See also, Eusebius, Eccles. Hist., Bk. 8, c. 17, p. 339 for title of Constantine.

<sup>39</sup>This date we are certain of since it is still celebrated by the Eastern Orthodox Church. See John H. Smith's Constantine the Great, c. 1, note #1, for primary sources on this date. Smith includes Corp. Inscip. Lat., 1, 2, p. 312; Natales Caesarum: 'Divi Constantini, III Kal, Martii.' A.H.M. Jones, Constantine and the Conversion of Europe gives the date as February 17. This is a misprint, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, p. 482. This account would make Constantine about 63 years of age.

<sup>41</sup>For the death of Alexander see Plutarch's Lives, trans. by John Dryden (New York: Bennett A. Cerf and Donald S. Klopfer, The Modern Library), pp. 853-854. Also, J.B. Bury, A History of Greece (New York: The Random House, Inc. The Modern Library), pp. 805-806.

that "...our emperor began his reign at the time of life at which the Macedonian died, yet doubled the length of his life, and trebled the length of his reign."<sup>42</sup> The closest estimate that we have is that Constantine lived to be sixty three years of age plus,<sup>43</sup> placing the year of his birth sometime between 272 and 274 A.D.

Herman Döerries places the year of Constantine's birth between 285 and 282 A.D.,<sup>44</sup> and there seems to be some evidence which upholds this argument. Döerries argument is based on the statement of Eusebius, in which Eusebius describes Constantine as a young man standing beside Diocletian while passing through Paléstine in 296 A.D.<sup>45</sup> And again, in another instance, in which Constantine himself remarked about the outbreak of the persecution in 303 A.D. and described himself as "when young."<sup>46</sup> The argument in this case being that if Constantine's birth took place at 274 A.D. he would be by 303 A.D. twenty-nine years old, and he would not have used the word "young." On the other hand, if he was born in 282 A.D., that would only make him eleven years old thus, giving some justification

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<sup>42</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, p. 483.

<sup>43</sup>Eutropius, the pagan historian, and one time secretary to Constantine the Great, reaffirms this by stating that Constantine died "in the thirty-first year of his reign, and the sixty-sixth of his age." Eutropius, Abridgment of Roman History, p. 531. Socrates Scholasticus also agrees with this view in that he states: "The Emperor Constantine lived sixty-five years, and reigned thirty-one. He died in the consulate of Felician and Tatian, on the twenty-second of May, in the second year of the 278th Olympiad." Socrates, Ecclesiastical History, p. 35. The second year of the 278th Olympiad was 337 A.D. and 22nd of May was the day of Pentecost that year. See Socrates, note #3, p. 35. Anonymous Valesianus also, states that Constantine died after reigning for thirty one years. Anonymous Valesianus, "Origo Constantini Imperatoris" found in Ammianus Marcellinus, Vol. III, Excerta Valesiana, trans by John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 531.

<sup>44</sup>Herman Döerries, Constantine the Great, p. 17. J.H. Smith, Constantine the Great, also agrees with this. pp. 1-2.

<sup>45</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 19, p. 487

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., Bk. 2, c. 51, p. 512.

to the later birth year of Constantine. In addition, the panegyrist at Constantine's wedding feast in 307 A.D. describes Constantine as "the adolescent emperor."<sup>47</sup> While these arguments prove to be somewhat convincing, the statements of Eusebius and Eutropius (a man who was a pagan and one who spent time with Constantine) placing the mortal life of the emperor at sixty three years of age, outweigh all other evidence on the whole. Constantine's year of birth is thus fixed between 272 and 274 A.D.

The place of Constantine's birth was most probably Naissus, Dacia.<sup>48</sup>

The early years of Constantine are somewhat obscure and there is no evidence

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<sup>47</sup>Incerti Auctoris Panegyricus, "Maximiano et Constantino Dictus," in Patrologia Latina series, Vol. 8, edited by J.P. Migne (Paris: Excudebut Urayet, in via dicta D'Amboise, Près La Barrière D'enfer, Ou Petit-Montrouge, 1844), c. 1, pp. 610-611. The argument in this case is that if in 307 Constantine was thirty three years old, basing his birth at 274, the word "adolescent" would not have been used.

<sup>48</sup>There are three theories concerning the birthplace of Constantine. The first theory is that he was born in Colchester in Britain. Edward Gibbon suggests that this story was fabricated by Geoffrey of Monmouth. See, Edward Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol. I (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co.), c.24, p 300. The lack of evidence that Constantius and Helena, Constantine's parents, visited Britain before 274 and 280 proves this theory to be a fallacy. The entire theory rests on the remarks of one of the panegyrists "Liberavit ille Britannias servitute; tu etiam nobiles illic oriendo fecisti" ("you ennobled the Britains by arising there"); Incerti Auctoris Panegyricus, "Maximiano et Constantino Dictus," in Patrologia Latina, 8, 1844, c. 4, p 612. The word "oriendo" in this case refers to Constantine's rise as Emperor more than his birth, thus, giving little support to the theory that he was born in Britain.

The second theory is that Constantine was born in Drepanum, a city on the shores of the Gulf of Nicomedia on the southern coast of the Bosphorus. There is little evidence to support this theory, because it is mainly based on the fact that Constantine renamed it Helenopolis, but probably dignified it so because it was the birthplace of his mother, Helena, more than anything else. See Gibbon's Decline and Fall, p. 300, footnote #3 for a discussion on this; also, E.C. Richardson in "Prolegomena," of Vita Constantini by Eusebius, p. 411, note #4. Procopius of Caesaria (547-565) says that Helena was born in Drepanum, and that was the reason for Constantine's action in which he renamed it Helenopolis. Procopius, Histories, trans. by H.B. Dewing, Vol. 8 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), Bk. 5, c. 3, p. 321.

The most widely accepted place of Constantine's birth is Naissus and this is confirmed by Constantine's contemporary, Julius Firmicius, a student of

to indicate whether he received a Christian education. It is more than likely, as will be seen from the description of his parents, that he received no Christian education at all.

Constantine's father was Flavius Constantius Chlorus, "a Neo-Platonist and philanthropist,"<sup>49</sup> who after the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian was declared Augustus of the Western Empire. Although Eusebius makes Constantius to be a pious Christian,<sup>50</sup> there is no proof to validate this theory. Eusebius based his conclusions on the way Constantius ruled his section of the Empire, in that, he allowed freedom of religion as opposed to his colleagues who conducted violent persecutions against the Christians in their section.<sup>51</sup>

There are several reasons which might explain the attitude of Constantius towards the Christians, and Eusebius' assertion that Constantius was a Christian cannot be included. One reason was the basic make up of his character, in that, he felt it unnecessary and unwarranted to persecute the Christian minority in his section. Another reason, and one which is most probable, is the small number of Christians that existed in his section.

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astrology, in de Astrologia, 1, 1, 4; it is also, confirmed by Stephenus Byzantianus, and Constantinus Porphyrius. See E. Gibbon, Decline and Fall, p. 300, note #3. Anonymous Valesianus, in Excerta Valesiana, also confirms this by saying that Constantine was brought up in Naissus, p. 509.

<sup>49</sup>E.C. Richardson in "Prolegomena" of Vita Constantini, p. 485, note #3, describes Constantius as such. Eutropius describes the character of Constantius as: "He was an excellent man, of extreme benevolence, who studied to increase the resources of the provinces and of private persons, cared but little for the improvement of the public treasury...." Eutropius, Abridgement, p. 528.

<sup>50</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. I, c. 17, p. 487

<sup>51</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. I, c. 13, p. 485; also, Lactantius, "De mortibus persecutorum," c. 15, p. 307; Eutropius also gives an account, although not mentioning the Christians he states that Constantius "By the Gauls he was not only beloved but venerated, especially because, under his government, they had escaped the suspicious prudence of Diocletian, and the sanguinary rashes of Maximian." Eutropius, Abridgement..., p. 528.

"In contrast with the East," says F.N. Hillgarth, "...where whole provinces were already largely Christian--but which Constantine was not to conquer until 324--Christianity in the Latin West, except in North Africa, was the religion of a small minority."<sup>52</sup> J.H.S. Burleigh with respect to Christianity in Britain remarks:

...The establishment of the Roman province of Britain in A.D. 50 opened the door to Roman civilization.... Among these civilian incomers there were possibly some Christians. At all events Tertulian of Carthage and Origin of Alexandria in the first half of the third century refer to the existence of Christians in Britain, though Tertulian doubtless exaggerates when he refers c. 211 to 'regions of the Britons inaccessible to the Romans but subject to Christ.'<sup>53</sup>

W.H.C. Frend suggests that although Christianity was spread from east to west to some degree as Mithraism, the cults of Isis, Serapis and Jupiter Dalichenus--that is, "...conveyed by families of traders who took their gods with them to their new homes, by soldiers, travelers and even slaves..."--it was aided greatly "with the influence of the Jewish settlements.... In the West, apart from Rome and some of the larger towns in north Africa, there were few Jewish centres, and consequently few Christian centres in the first two centuries."<sup>54</sup> Although, at the Council of Arles in 314 Britain was represented by three bishoprics at York, London and perhaps Colchester,

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<sup>52</sup>F.N. Hillgarth, The Conversion of Western Europe 350-750 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 2.

<sup>53</sup>J.H.S. Burleigh, A Church History of Scotland (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 5; Tertulian, "An Answer to the Jews," in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III, c. 7, p. 158.

<sup>54</sup>W.H.C. Frend, "The Christianization of Roman Britain," in Christianity in Britain, 300-700, ed. by M.W. Barley and R.P.C. Hanson (Great Britain: Leicester University Press, 1968), p. 46.

"...Christianity in Britain seems to have been less advanced than elsewhere in the Celtic provinces and no more significant at this stage than any other mystery cults brought in from the East."<sup>55</sup>

G.R. Watson in his article, "Christianity in the Roman Army in Britain," discloses that archaeological findings on that island, insure us, that although there were traces of the Christian element in the Roman army in Britain, the movement was so small, that their existence was almost insignificant.<sup>56</sup> Edward Gibbon agrees with this view, when he states that Christianity had spread in the eastern provinces, but in the western provinces it was a slow moving process.<sup>57</sup> It is apparant, therefore, that Constantius

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 37. "One indication of the comperative insignificance of Christianity in the Celtic provinces at this time is that Irenaeus, bishop of the important centre of Sirmium on the Danube was described in his Acta Martyrum as a young man, whose parents and relatives were pagan." (Acta Sancti Irenaei IV. 5.), note #18, p. 47 in W.H.C. Frend's article. Other sources on Church history of Britain see: Margaret Deanesly, The Pre-Conquest Church in England (London: Adam and Charles Black Ltd., 1961); Thomas Fuller, The Church History of Britain, Vol. I (Oxford University Press, 1970); John R.H. Moorman, A History of the Church in England (New York: Morehouse-Gorham Co., 1954); Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, ed. by Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Henry Mayr-Harting, The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England (London: B.T. Batsford, 1972); John Godfrey, The Church in Anglo-Saxon England (Cambridge University Press, 1962).

<sup>56</sup>G.R. Watson, "Christianity in the Roman Army in Britain," in Christianity in Britain, 300-700, pp. 51-53. Watson goes into detail in this article to show that coins, scriptures, tombs, and temples, dating from the third and fourth century in England, give every indication that the Christian movement within the Roman ranks in Britain was insignificant. In addition, he concludes, that the major portion of the findings indicate that the major religious movement within the ranks, belonged to the Cult of Mithras.

<sup>57</sup>E. Gibbon, Decline and Fall, Vol. I, c. 15, p. 375. In this chapter Gibbon discusses the spread of Christianity in the east as opposed to the west and gives figures taken from St. John Chrysostom's Opera I, as to the number of Christians in various parts of the eastern provinces. For example, Antioch 100,000; Rome 50,000; and how the Greek provinces accepted the new religion without reservation, pp. 367-377.

had no reason to carry out an edict of persecution against such a small minority, for they posed no threat to him or his government.<sup>58</sup>

Of Constantius' true religious beliefs, it appears that he had monotheistic beliefs, and may even have been a worshipper of the Sun-god or Mithras. It further appears that his army was composed of the same cult.<sup>59</sup> The monotheistic tendencies of Constantius become evident when one observes the coins minted during the time. When Constantius took the office of Augustus after the abdication of Diocletian, Galerius at first placed Hercules on the coins of Constantius, much in the same manner as Diocletian had done with Maximian. Constantius, however, "in the mints under his jurisdiction, retained the image of Mars which he had used while a Caesar."<sup>60</sup> All evidence surviving from the fourth century depict Constantius to be a monotheist as the coin inscriptions repeatedly depict him with the emblem of the sol invictus.<sup>61</sup> According to Herman Döerries, Constantine the Great, this tradition was followed also by Constantine, and he retained "the emblem of the sol invictus--that is, 'the unconquerable sun'--well into his Christian period."<sup>62</sup>

The cult of Mithras had been imported to Italy probably by soldiers and traders from various parts of the east, during the first century A.D.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>This point further proves that Constantine's Christian attitude later in his life did not begin here because he had no Christian support to depend upon. This point will be discussed later.

<sup>59</sup>On the religious make up of the Roman army in Britain, see G.R. Watson's excellent article, "Christianity in the Roman army in Britain," in Christianity in Britain, 300-700.

<sup>60</sup>Herman Döerries, Constantine the Great, p. 25.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>63</sup>Michael Grant, The World of Rome (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1960), p. 23.

It spread very widely throughout the west during the first two centuries A.D.:

and in 273 A.D., Aurelian founded by the side of the Mysteries of the tauroctonus a god a public religion, which he richly endowed, in honor of the sol invictus. Diocletian, whose court with its complicated hierachy, its prostrations before its lord, and its crowds of eunucks,...was an imitation of the court of the Sassanids, was naturally inclined to adopt doctrines of Persian origin which flattered his despotic instincts.<sup>64</sup>

Michael Grant in The World of Rome informs us that Mithraism was chiefly spread by the army, "and particularly the officers, with the participation of many commanders of units.... To the military man Mithras offered irresistible appeal. For he was invictus--the unconquerable Herculean protector."<sup>65</sup> With the spread of Mithras in the West (the Rhine, the Danube, and the British frontier) through the army, it is more than likely that Constantius was a follower of Mithras more than he was a Christian.

As to whether Constantius was a monotheist or not, it is more than likely that he was, for the only diety found in his coin inscriptions is that of the sol invictus. John B. Firth, Constantine the Great, says that Constantius' religion was "a syncretistic monotheism; that he was content to see the diety in the Sun, in Mithras."<sup>66</sup>

In tracing the life of Helena, we find it to be as obscure as the early life of her son Constantine. From Constantine's contemporaries we have little information with regard to Helena. In fact, all that is known

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<sup>64</sup>Franz Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, trans. by Thomas J. McCormack (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), pp. 199-200.

<sup>65</sup>Michael Grant, The World of Rome, p. 204.

<sup>66</sup>John B. Firth, Constantine the Great (New York, London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), p. 328.

is that she was wife to Constantius, and by some accounts that she held the rank of concubina, a status quite legal in the Roman world.<sup>67</sup>

In 293 A.D., Diocletian elevated Constantius to the rank of Caesar. One of the requirements placed upon Constantius was that he divorce Helena and marry Theodora, step-daughter of Maximian Augustus. Helena disappeared from history in 293 and did not come back into the scene for another thirty years. The year 293 was also the year, in which Constantine for the first time appears as a real figure.<sup>68</sup>

Of Constantine's early religious education, it is more than likely that it was anything but Christian. With regard to his formal education we know even less. Eusebius mentions Constantine's formal education only

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<sup>67</sup> Eutropius mentions that Constantine was the son of Constantius "...by a wife of obscure birth." Eutropius, Abridgement of Roman Hist., p. 529; Zosimus says that Helena's father was an innkeeper, and that she was a prostitute in his inn. Zosimus, Historia Nova; The Decline of Rome, trans. by James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, 1960), Bk. 2, c. 8, p. 54; Orosius agrees with this view, and calls Helena a concubina: "...qui Constantinum filium ex concubina Helena...." Paulus Orosius, Hispanus Presbyter, "Historiarum Liber," in Migne's Patrol. Latina, Vol. 31, 1857, Bk. 7, c. 25, p. 1128. Zosimus and Orosius were both pagans, however, and their opinions are directly related to the remarks of Eutropius, as they attempted to discredit the Christian elements of both Helena and Constantine. Eutropius, a pagan himself has gone as far as using the legal term "wife," thus shedding some light on this question. Anonymous Valesianus, with regard to the relationship between Helena and Constantius says that Constantius had "to put away his former wife Helena." Anonymous Valesianus, Excerta Valesiana, p. 509. By using the word wife, the author acknowledges the legal marriage of Constantius and Helena.

<sup>68</sup> Before this year the information concerning both Constantine and Helena is so scarce that we cannot get a clear picture of their lives. But, from this year on, Constantine for the first time becomes a historical figure, and his life can easily be traced.

once, and even then he refuses to elaborate on it.

He was, however, even more conspicuous for the excellence of his mental qualities than for his superior physical endowments; being gifted in the first place with a sound judgment, and having also reaped the advantages of a liberal education.<sup>69</sup>

The words "liberal education" are as much as we have from Eusebius' testimony with regard to Constantine's formal education. Lactantius has nothing to say with regard to Constantine's formal education; but whereas he insists that Constantine had been called to the court of Diocletian in 293<sup>70</sup> as a hostage for his father's loyalty,<sup>71</sup> the fourth century historian Praxagoras Atheniensis declares that Diocletian summoned Constantine so that he might be educated.<sup>72</sup>

It is more than likely that both reasons--one given by Lactantius, and the other by Praxagoras--, were true. Constantine remained in the east, away from his father, from 293 until his escape in 305. Although there are no sources which prove this point, Constantine had an opportunity during that time to study the administration of Diocletian, and from him perhaps received the best possible education in ruling an Empire.

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<sup>69</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, p. 487; Gibbon says that Constantine had an "illiterate" education; see Decline and Fall., p. 538.

<sup>70</sup>The fact that Constantine enters the court of Diocletian in 293 is probably the reason, why we are able to trace his life history from that period on.

<sup>71</sup>Lactantius narrates the many requests Constantius had made to the eastern emperor, Galerius, to send his son to him, and mentions Constantine escaping from the hands of Galerius. Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 24, p. 311.

<sup>72</sup>Praxagoras Atheniensis in Photius', Bibliothèque, Vol. I, trans. by René Henry (Paris: Société D'édition, "Les Belles Lettres," 1959), c. 62, p. 61. Anonymous Valesianus says that Constantine was held hostage by Diocletian and Galerius. He also says, that Constantine "had but slight training in letters." Anonymous Valesianus, Excerta Valesiana, p. 509.

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CHAPTER III

THE YEARS 275-325 A.D. IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Before the subject under discussion can be continued--that is, the religious character of Constantine--it is necessary that a general summary be given of the historical events which transpired between the years 275 A.D. and 306 A.D., the year Constantine was declared Emperor in Britain by his army. This summary is necessary in order to clarify the conditions under which Constantine obtained control of the empire.

The year 275 A.D. in Roman history marks the death of the emperor Aurelian (270-275 A.D.), and the beginning, of what Gibbon had described, as the "third century anarchy."<sup>73</sup> Following this period the Roman central government became even more unstable. Aurelian's successor, Tacitus, lasted only six months, followed by Probus who lasted six years, and Carus who followed Probus was assassinated two years later, in 282 A.D.<sup>74</sup>

The Roman world did not witness any real stability until 284 A.D., when an Illyrian general by the name of Diocles, better known as Diocletian

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<sup>73</sup>In describing the events which transpired after the death of Aurelian, during which time the Senate and the army were competing for the right of electing the next emperor, Gibbon remarks: "...eight months insensibly elapsed: an amazing period of tranquil anarchy, during which the Roman world remained without a sovereign, without a usurper, and without a sedition." E. Gibbon, Decline and Fall..., p. 243.

<sup>74</sup>For further reading on this part of Roman history, see: E. Gibbon, Decline and Fall...; Ferdinand Lot, The End of the Ancient World and the Beginning of the Middle Ages, trans. Philip Leon and Malette Leon (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1966); J.B. Bury, History of the Later Roman Empire (New York, Dover Publications, 1958).

(284-305 A.D.), assumed the imperial purple after a series of civil wars. Diocletian, declared emperor by his army, quickly realized the need for governmental reforms within the Empire, if stability was to be returned to the Roman world.<sup>75</sup> Diocletian made two major reforms, one in administration, and the other in religion. Realizing that the Empire had grown too large to be governed by one man, he divided it in two: East and West. Since the Senate had lost practically all of its functions, Diocletian set up a dyarchy, a system of two Emperors ruling at the same time. He, Diocletian, remained in the east, in his newly founded capital of Nicomedia, as the senior Augustus and final authority to all matters concerning the empire. To rule the western section of the Empire, he appointed Maximian, another general, first under the title of Caesar, and later promoted him to the rank of Augustus, second only to Diocletian. In 293 A.D., Diocletian felt that the empire was too large for even two men to rule effectively, and therefore, appointed two Caesars, first as heirs to the imperial throne, and second as administrative assistants to the two Augusti.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>For Diocletian's reforms see: H.P. L'Orange, Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire (Princeton University Press, 1965). See especially the section entitled, "The Reforms of Diocletian," pp. 37-68. Also, M. Rostovtzeff, The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1924), c. 12, "The Oriental Despotism and the Problem of the Decay of Ancient Civilization," pp. 449-489; see also, Gibbon's Decline and Fall..., c. XIII. Arthur E.R. Boak, The Master of the Offices in the Later Roman and Byzantine Empires (N.Y.: Macmillan Co., 1919).

<sup>76</sup>Lactantius relates these events in Chapter VII of "De mortibus persecutorum," p. 303. These events are also mentioned by Anonymous Valesianus in "Origo Constantini Imperatoris." p. 509. Also, Eutropius in his Abridgment of Roman History gives the same details, Bk. IX, c. 19, pp. 523-524. See also, Gibbon's Decline and Fall..., c. 13, p. 266.

The two Caesars chosen were Flavius Constantius Chlorus, father of Constantine, and Galerius Maximianus, "a man of excellent moral character, and skilful in military affairs."<sup>77</sup> In order to make Constantius and Galerius legal heirs to the throne, Diocletian had both of them "divorce the wives that they had before"<sup>78</sup> and had Constantius marry Theodora, the step-daughter of Maximian, while Galerius married Valeria, the daughter of Diocletian.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the empire had been divided into four: Diocletian and Galerius in the east, with Maximian and Constantius in the west.<sup>80</sup>

Diocletian's other major reform was his attempt of reviving the ancient Roman religions, as a method of solidifying his government before the Roman people. Under the direction of Diocletian the two Augusti assumed the names of dieties: Jovius for Diocletian and Hercules<sup>81</sup> for Maximian. By adopting the names Jovius and Hercules, the empire had been completely theocratized, as in the Persian Empire, "as Diocletian was considered to be the vicegerent of Jupiter on earth, the king of the gods, and Maximian of Hercules, the hero who under his father Jupiter's guidance had toiled for the benefit of mankind."<sup>82</sup> Diocletian, as the vicegerent of Jupiter,

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<sup>77</sup> Eutropius, Abridgement of Roman History, Bk. X, c. II, p. 528. The year 293 A.D. was also the year Constantine was sent to the court of Diocletian.

<sup>78</sup> Eutropius here is referring to Constantine's mother Helena, Bk. II, c. 12, p. 524.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 524.

<sup>80</sup> Diocletian resided in Nicomedia and was the final authority to all matters. His Caesar, Galerius had control of the Danube banks, as the safeguard of the Illyrian provinces. The other Augustus Maximian reigned in Italy and his Caesar, Constantius had control of the Celtic provinces.

<sup>81</sup> Lactantius, in "De mortibus persecutorum," c. 52, p. 322, mentions the titles of the two Augusti as Jovii and Herculii. E. Gibbon c. 13, p. 268 says that they adopted these names "from a motive either of pride or superstition....," but it is my opinion they wanted to give their government a certain character, which would unite the people of the Empire.

<sup>82</sup> A.H.M. Jones, Constantine and the Conversion of Europe, p. 13.

demanded proskynesis<sup>83</sup> from his people, who had become his subjects.

Diocletian and Maximian reigned until 305 A.D., when they put down the purple and abdicated voluntarily, thus, elevating Galerius and Constantius to the ranks of Augusti. Just prior to his abdication, however, in 303 A.D., Diocletian had commenced a fierce persecution against the Christians.<sup>84</sup> This persecution, known as "the great persecution,"<sup>85</sup> came late in the reign of Diocletian for reasons which have not been found fully as yet. Lactantius

<sup>83</sup>Eutropius makes this assertion when he states that "He (Diocletian) was the first that introduced into the Roman empire a ceremony suited rather to royal usages than to Roman liberty, giving orders that he should be adored,<sup>a</sup> whereas all emperors before him were only saluted. He put ornaments of precious stones on his dress and shoes, when the imperial distinction had previously been only in the purple robe, the rest of the habit being the same as that of other men." Eutropius, Abridgement of Roman History, Bk. 9, c. 26, p. 526.

<sup>a</sup>This was the form of proskynesis practiced by the Persians. Cornelius Nepos (first century B.C.), in his Lives of Eminent Commanders, Bk. 9, c. 3, of his narrative on Conon the Athenian general during the Peloponnesian War, describes this form of adoration practiced by the Persians, as "to pay adoration to the King which the Greeks call proskynesis;" in John Selby Watson's, Justin, Cornelius Nepos, and Eutropius, p. 349.

<sup>84</sup>Persecution of Christians was not a new policy in the Roman world. Lactantius in "De mortibus persecutorum," mentions the many persecutions conducted against the Christians by the Roman emperors, beginning with Nero down to the final persecutions of Licinius. For a more detailed account of the persecutions see: Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History; Monsignor Louis Duchesne, Early History of the Christian Church from its Foundation to the End of the Fifth Century; Harold Mattingly, Christianity in the Roman Empire (New York: W.W. Norton Co. Inc., 1967); Robert M. Grant, Augustus to Constantine (First edition: N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1970); Ludwig Hertling and Engelbert Kirschbaum, The Roman Catacombs and Their Martyrs, trans. by M. Joseph Costelloe (Milwaukee: the Bruce Publishing Co., 1957). See especially c. 6, on "The Persecutions."

<sup>85</sup>L. Hertling and E. Kirschbaum in The Roman Catacombs and Their Martyrs, declare that "...in 303 persecution broke out again, and this persecution, which is associated with the name Diocletian, was the bloodiest of all. The whole bureaucracy and system of police, which reached a considerable degree of perfection under this emperor, was brought into play. A series of laws and ordinances was issued which embraced almost everything which up to the time had been ordained with respect to the Christians." p. 100.

informs us that most of the persecutions took place in the eastern part of the empire; but, in the west, where Constantius Chlorus reigned (Gaul, and Britain), "he permitted the demolition of churches,--mere walls, and capable of being built up again,--but he preserved entire that true temple of God, which is the human body."<sup>86</sup>

What was the reason for this persecution by Diocletian of a religious sect such as the Christians? Diocletian had allowed the Christian to practice their beliefs for the first eighteen years of his reign without any restrictions. Yet, in the last two years of his reign he changed his policy by conducting the bloodiest persecution against the Christians of any Emperor before him.

One explanation might be as suggested by Jacob Burckhardt, that the Christians sought "to gain control of the imperial office...by converting Diocletian."<sup>87</sup> Burckhardt's statement has a certain amount of validity in it. The fact that there were Christians serving in the court of Diocletian is stated in an epistle from Theonas, bishop of Alexandria (282-300 A.D.) to Lucianus, the chief chamberlain of Diocletian.

...For I hear that one of you keeps the private money of the emperor,<sup>88</sup> another the imperial robes and ornaments; another the precious vessels; another the books, who, I understand, do not yet belong to believers; and others the different parts of the household goods...

Theonas also instructs Lucianus to do his job in a Christian manner, and do anything that is asked of him, unless it meant to go against the will of God.

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<sup>86</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus persecutorum," c. 15, p. 306. This goes back to the point already discussed in Chapter II that Christians were a minority in the Western Empire.

<sup>87</sup>J. Burckhardt, The Age of Constantine..., p. 250.

<sup>88</sup>Theonas is here referring to Diocletian.

In addition, Theonas also mentions that Lucianus was responsible for converting persons in the palace, and he should attempt to convert the emperor (Diocletian) "...to the knowledge of the truth."<sup>89</sup>

Lactantius also mentions Diocletian having attendants who were Christians, and also, asserts that there were Christians serving in the army as well.<sup>90</sup> During the persecutions, Lactantius informs us, that Diocletian ordered the Christians in his service to sacrifice to the ancient gods or face dismissal.<sup>91</sup>

Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History, makes a statement which gives some justification to Burckhardt's theory. He mentions of persons in Melitene (Eastern Cappadocia) "...and others throughout Syria, attempted to usurp the government, a royal edict directed that the rulers of the churches everywhere should be thrown into prison and bonds."<sup>92</sup> Eusebius further informs us that in the nineteenth year of Diocletian's reign "he commanded that the churches be leveled to the ground and the Scriptures be destroyed by fire, and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded, and that the household servants, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity be deprived of freedom."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>The English translation of this letter may be found in the Ante-Nicene Fathers series, Vol. VI, pp. 158-161. The letter is believed to be authentic, and Jerome in his Chronicle, c. 76, p. 377, found in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III, mentions Theonas ruling the Church of Alexandria during the reign of Diocletian. Burckhardt mentions this letter on page 251.

<sup>90</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus persecutorum," c. 10, p. 304.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., c. 10, p. 305.

<sup>92</sup>Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 8, c. 6, p. 328.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., Bk. 8, c. 2, p. 324.

All of this evidence points to one conclusion, that Diocletian associated the revolts in the Eastern part of the Empire with the Christians, and this may have been his reason for the persecutions in 303 A.D. There seems to be little evidence to support the theory that Diocletian conducted his persecution out of religious motives. If his main thrust was to do away with the Christians simply out of religious motives, then this policy would have been enforced much earlier in his reign. This being the case, therefore, Burckhardt's theory can be substantiated to a certain degree, in that Diocletian may have begun his persecutions, only after he had uncovered a plot, instigated by Christians, to Christianize the Imperial government. The Christian communities at the time were so well organized that such a plot was conceivable. Moreover, it becomes evident that this theory is culminated by the fact, that Constantine either voluntarily or through persuasion by Christian leaders did change the religious character of the Empire in a relatively short period of time.

Constantine had to be aware of these events because during this period he was in the court of Diocletian. There is no evidence which indicate what his view of this subject was at the time, but there, he had the occasion to observe the administration of Diocletian, and by the same token to befriend Christians, and even be influenced by them.

As mentioned before, the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian in 305, gave the imperial throne to Constantius Chlorus in the west, and Galerius in the east. Diocletian's decision to abdicate is also one that raises a question. Lactantius informs us that his abdication was as a result of his illness and the fact that Galerius coerced him in abdicating.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus....," c. 18, pp. 307-308.

M.A. Smith, From Christ to Constantine, raises another possibility and says that "Diocletian was a sick man, and Galerius had assumed effective control,"<sup>95</sup> thus, forcing Diocletian to abdicate. Smith also suggests that the persecutions of 303, were as a result of "the fact that power was changing hands at the imperial court," thus, putting the blame of the persecutions on Galerius.<sup>96</sup> This idea on the persecutions would also go along with Lactantius, who also blamed Galerius,<sup>97</sup> and would certainly help to explain the sudden change in policy against the Christians by the government in 303. Smith's theory also raises another possibility on the cause of the persecutions, and that is that Galerius may have been responsible for the rebellions against Diocletian in Eastern Cappadocia mentioned by Eusebius; but when Diocletian found out about it, Galerius fearing the emperor, decided to put the blame on the Christians. There is no mention of such an act by Galerius in any of the sources available, however, and the possibility of such an act is very slim. Diocletian's reason for abdicating, however, as given by Smith, does have a lot of validity in it, in that Diocletian by 303 was aging and may have been ill, thus abdicating for that reason at the time, but probably had planned to leave office voluntarily anyway.

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<sup>95</sup>M.A. Smith, From Christ to Constantine (London: Billing and Sons Limited, 1971), p. 163.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>97</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus....," c. 12-13, pp. 305-306.

The vacancies created by Diocletian and Maximian in 305, were filled by Constantius and Galerius. In their places as Caesars, Diocletian appointed Severus<sup>98</sup> and Daia Maximin.<sup>99</sup> According to Lactantius, Constantine was present during the ceremony, and expected to be nominated as one of the Caesars, but he was passed over for Daia Maximin.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus persecutorum," c. 19, p. 308. Lactantius states that Severus was described by Diocletian as "...that dancer, that habitual drunkard, who turns night into day, and day into night." Galerius, however, influenced Diocletian to appoint Severus as Caesar in the west. There is no evidence to indicate the real character of Severus.

<sup>99</sup>Daia (Daja) Maximin was the man chosen as Caesar to Galerius over Constantine. Lactantius describes the character of Daia, and we have no other evidence in relation to this, as a man "lately taken from the tending of cattle in forests to serve as a common soldier, immediately made one of the life-guard, presently a tribune, and next day Caesar...; a person ignorant alike of war and of civil affairs, and from a herdsman became a leader of armies." "De mortibus persecutorum," c. 19, p. 309.

<sup>100</sup>Lactantius describes these events that both Constantine and the people expected Constantine to be declared Caesar.

"Constantius also had a son, Constantine, a young man of very great worth, and well meriting the high station of Caesar. The distinguished comeliness of his figure, his strict attention to all military duties, his virtuous demeanour and singular affability, had endeared him to the troops, and made him the choice of every individual. He was then at court, having long before been created by Diocletian a tribune of the first order." Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 18, p. 308. That Constantine served with Diocletian is evidenced by Eusebius, when he states, that he had seen Constantine for the first time in 296 "when he passed through Palestine with the senior emperor (Diocletian), at whose right hand he stood...." They were on their way to Egypt in the famous campaign against Achilleus in 296-297. Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 19, p. 487. This campaign is also mentioned by Eutropius, but he does not mention Constantine taking part. Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 9, c. 23, p. 525.

Anonymous Valesianus says that Constantine "was held as a hostage by Diocletian and Galerius, and did valiant service under those Emperors in Asia." Anonymi Valesiani Pars Prior, "Origo Constantini Imperatoris," in Ammianus Marcellinus, Excerta Valesiana, Vol. III, p. 509.

Lactantius continues his description of the ceremony mentioned above, and says that, "every one looked at Constantine; for there was no doubt that the choice would fall on him.... Suddenly he (Diocletian) declared that the Caesars were Severus and Maximin. The amazement was universal. Constantine stood near in public view, and men began to question amongst themselves whether his name too had not been changed into Maximin; when, in the sight of all, Galerius, stretching back his hand, put Constantine aside, and drew Daia forward...." Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 19, pp. 308-309.

Constantine remained in the court of Galerius until 306, when he escaped to Britain where he found his father.<sup>101</sup> He apparently spent some time with his father, before Constantius died, because, Anonymous Valesianus relates the fact that "after winning a victory over the Picts," Constantius died at York, and "Constantine was unanimously hailed as Caesar"<sup>102</sup> by all the troops."<sup>103</sup>

Constantine had been declared Emperor in Britain, in 306, by his father's troops. There is no indication at this time, that Constantine had any Christian inclinations, or that he had ideas in mind of Christianizing the Empire. The only conclusive evidence is that the period during which he spent in Nicomedia, and the time he spent with his father were extremely critical in his life.

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<sup>101</sup>Lactantius relates the events of Constantius' many requests to Galerius for the release of Constantine as well as Constantine's escape. Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 24, p. 311. Anonymous Valesianus says that Galerius, after many requests by Constantius, finally sent Constantine to his father. Anonymous Valesianus, Excerta Valesiana, p. 511.

<sup>102</sup>Anonymous Valesianus, Excerta Valesiana, p. 511. Both Lactantius in "De mortibus..." (c. 24, p. 311) and Eusebius in Vita Constantini (Bk. 1, c. 21, p. 488) agree that Constantine found his father on his death-bed. Eumenius, however, disagrees with Eusebius and Lactantius, and says that Constantine reached his father, first in time to accompany him on his last expedition to Britain. Eumenius, "Panegyricus Constantino Dictus," in Patrologia Latina, Vol. VIII, 1844, c. 7, p. 628. G.P. Baker, Constantine the Great and the Christian Revolution, agrees with Eumenius; p. 87. E.C. Richardson in "Prolegomena" of Vita Constantini, also agrees; p. 412.

The evidence given by Valesianus and Eumenius appear to be correct, and Eusebius along with Lactantius appear to be misinformed.

<sup>103</sup>Valesianus describes Constantine being declared Caesar, while Eutropius says that he "was made Emperor in Britain, and succeeded his father as a most desirable ruler." Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 2, p. 528. Eusebius says that he was declared Emperor ("Imperial and Worshipful Augustus") by his father's army. Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. k. c.22, p.488. Lactantius says that he was declared Augustus also. Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 24, p. 311. It is apparent that Constantine was declared Emperor and not Caesar by the army of Constantius.

In summarizing these events, one finds Constantine in the court of Diocletian from 293 to 305, where he had a chance to learn about administration. He witnessed the persecution of the Christians, and if the cause for the persecution was that the Christians were behind a plot for gaining control of the government, he was aware of their strength in the east. Moreover, he had been betrayed by Diocletian and Galerius, if the testimony of Lactantius is correct, after serving them well for many years, by not being nominated Caesar. Add to that, the fact that if he had not been held as hostage by Diocletian, he had by then become aware that he was a hostage to Galerius, and according to Lactantius in danger of his life. There is one more point which brought about a schism in the government, thus, giving cause for Constantine to seek his own future, rather than obey the wishes of his father's colleagues. Lactantius mentions of Galerius' dissatisfaction towards Constantius, when Constantius refused to obey Diocletian's edict of persecution against the Christians.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, Lactantius says that after the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian,

Galerius...began to consider himself alone as the sovereign of the Roman Empire. Necessity had required the appointment of Constantius to the first rank; but Galerius made small account of one who was of an easy temper, and of health declining and precarious. He looked for the speedy death of Constantius. And although that prince should recover, it seemed not difficult to force him to put off the imperial purple; for what else could he do, if pressed by his three colleagues to abdicate?<sup>105</sup>

The point which Lactantius is making with this statement is that Galerius wanted Constantius out of the administration as soon as possible, so that he

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<sup>104</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 15, p. 306.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., c. 20, p. 304.

may appoint a man of his own to that position. This was not a true schism of the government as such, but a schism of personalities while Constantius lived.

The year which Constantine spent with his father in Britain was also critical. During that period, Constantine had taken part in one military campaign under his father<sup>106</sup> and had become acquainted with the troops. In addition, his father must have made him even more aware of the need for Constantine to be his own man, since his Colleagues in the other parts of the empire were by no means amiable towards him. Nevertheless, Constantius died at York in 306, and Constantine was declared emperor by his army, and at this time the Christian faith seemed to be insignificant in so far as Constantine was concerned.

The ensuing events, however, became even more critical for Constantine. Galerius refused to recognize Constantine as emperor, but did declare him Caesar, and instead elevated Severus to the rank of Augustus.<sup>107</sup> In the meantime, Maxentius, son of Maximian and son-in-law to Galerius, was declared emperor in Rome by a section of the Praetorian Guard,<sup>108</sup> who had revolted (306 A.D.).

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<sup>106</sup> Anonymous Valesianus mentions Constantius' last battle in Britain against the Picts. "But his father Constantius, after winning a victory over the Picts, died at York, and Constantine was unanimously hailed as Caesar by all the troops." Anonymous Valesianus, Excerta Valesiana, p. 511. This statement gives some indication that Constantine had spent some time with his father.

<sup>107</sup> Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 25, p. 311.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., c. 26, p. 311; See also, Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 2, p. 528.

Galerius immediately sent Severus with an army to restore order in Rome, but he was defeated by Maxentius.<sup>109</sup> Maximian, father of Maxentius, resumed the purple once more and he found himself ruling the same domain with his son. To protect himself against Galerius, Maximian in 307 A.D. went to Gaul, where he gave his daughter Fausta as wife to Constantine in hope of an alliance.<sup>110</sup> Galerius, in the meantime, attempted a siege on Rome but was unsuccessful and retired into his own territories.<sup>111</sup>

Maximian, now Constantine's father-in-law, attempted to betray Constantine, first by corrupting his soldiers,<sup>112</sup> and when that failed by plotting to murder him in his sleep. The plot was uncovered by Fausta and revealed to Constantine, however, who placed a slave in his bed to be murdered instead of Constantine, thus, detecting Maximian in the act of betrayal.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Eutropius says that Severus "was deserted by the treachery of his soldiers." Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 2, p. 310; Lactantius says, that the army which Severus was put in charge of was that of Maximian Herculus, and Maxentius induced Maximian to resume the purple and declare him Augustus, which Maximian did. When Severus reached Rome with his army, his soldiers abandoned him and went over to Maximian. Severus was later killed in Ravenna, where he had taken refuge. Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 26, p. 311.

<sup>110</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 27, p. 312.

<sup>111</sup>Both Lactantius and Eutropius agree that Maximian and Maxentius quarreled with each other, as each was trying to take the power away from the other and that was the reason for Fausta's marriage to Constantine. See: Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 27, p. 312; Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 3, p. 529.

<sup>112</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 29, p. 313.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., c. 30, p. 313. Lactantius, who honors Constantine as a most pious and Christian emperor, has nothing to say in criticism of Constantine's action, which cost the life of another person so that he might catch his father-in-law in the act of murder. This cannot be the actions of a true Christian.

As punishment for his actions, Constantine allowed Maximian to choose his own way of dying, "and he strangled himself."<sup>114</sup>

While this power struggle was in progress, Constantine had been busy with the internal affairs of his section. Eutropius mentions that "Constantine was ruling in Gaul with great approbation both of the soldiers and the people of the province, having overthrown the Franks and Alamanni with great slaughter, and captured their Kings, whom on exhibiting a magnificent show of games, he exposed to wild beasts."<sup>115</sup> While Constantine was busy stabilizing his section of the empire, the imperial government by 311<sup>116</sup> had been in the hands of four emperors: Constantine, Maxentius, Licinius and Maximian. Maximian died in 310 and Galerius in 311.

The death of Galerius is of extreme importance for it is reported by Lactantius that before Galerius died he issued an edict to stop the persecution of the Christians, an imperial policy conducted throughout the eastern provinces since the reign of Diocletian in 303. Lactantius reports that Galerius had a malignant ulcer, "an incurable plague"<sup>117</sup> as the cause of his death.

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., c. 30, p. 313. Again, in this action there is no Christian policy which punishes a man by allowing him to choose the manner of his death. What happened to the Christian doctrine of forgiveness? It is obvious that Constantine had no Christian beliefs at this time.

<sup>115</sup>Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 3, p. 529. Eutropius mentions Constantine exposing his captives to wild beasts, unlike the Christian picture which Eusebius and Lactantius paint for us as the character of Constantine. This is also attested to by Eumenius in "Panegyricus Constantino Dictus," c. 12, p. 631. It is also found in "Incerti Panegyricus Constantino Augusto," in Patrologia Latina, Vol. 8, 1844, c. 23, p. 671. Nazarius also mentions this in "Panegyricus Constantino Dictus," in Patrologia Latina, Vol. 8, 1844, c. 16, p. 594.

<sup>116</sup>July 24, 311 marked the end of the first five years of Constantine's reign.

<sup>117</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 33, p. 315.

Just before he died, however, Galerius acknowledged God, and put forth an edict pardoning all Christians, ending all persecutions, and allowed them to restore their old places of religious assembly.<sup>118</sup> It is important to note that Galerius did not acknowledge the Christian God by enforcing this edict, for these are only the words of Lactantius, but merely gave religious freedom to the Christians. Eusebius accredits this edict to Constantine, Licinius and Galerius as its main authors.<sup>119</sup> If this statement by Eusebius can be accepted, then this was the first edict of toleration, and so far as can be determined the first time Constantine had become involved in Christian affairs.

In the ensuing events which followed the death of Galerius, one finds Maxentius and Constantine preparing for war against each other.<sup>120</sup> Constantine began his march in 313 and entered Italy by way of the Alps defeating the enemy and taking Sigusium, then Turin, Milan, Brescia, Verona, and eventually reached the gates of Rome where Maxentius resided. While marching to Rome, Constantine supposedly had his famous vision of the cross.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., c. 34, p. 315.

<sup>119</sup> Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 8, c. 17, pp. 339-340.

<sup>120</sup> There are two theories with respect as to why these two men prepared for war. Eusebius represents the occasion as a philanthropic movement on the part of Constantine, to free the Roman people from the "tyrannous oppression" of Maxentius. Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 26, p. 484. Praxagoras, in Photius' Bibliothèque, agrees with this theory, p. 62; also Nazarius in "Panegyricus Constantino Dictus," in Patrologia Latina, Vol. 8, 1844, c. 19, p. 596 and c. 27, p. 601; and Eutropius mentions of the civil war between Maxentius and Constantine and says that Maxentius "was spreading death among the nobility by every possible kind of cruelty." Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 4, p. 529. Zosimus says that Maxentius wanted to revenge the death of his father and that is why he prepared for war. Zosimus, Historia Nova, Bk. 2, c. 14, p. 59. The testimony of Zosimus is not very conclusive and the philanthropic motive is more justifiable in this case, along with Constantine's personal ambitions of becoming master of the western part of the Empire.

<sup>121</sup> The details of this alleged vision will be covered in the following chapter.

On October 26, 313, the forces of Maxentius and Constantine clashed near the Milvian bridge, and Constantine emerged triumphant as the sole emperor of the western portion of the empire.<sup>122</sup> The odds appeared to be against Constantine prior the battle. Zosimus informs us that Constantine's forces were of German, Gallic, and British origin. Maxentius' forces were made up of Romans, Italians, Tuscans, Carthaginians, and Sicilians. Constantine's forces numbered ninety thousand foot and eight thousand horse soldiers. Maxentius, on the other hand, numbered one hundred and seventy thousand foot, and eighteen thousand horse soldiers, thus having a considerably larger force than Constantine.<sup>123</sup>

Incerti Panegyricus, Constantino Augustus (313 A.D.), says that Constantine crossed the Alps with a force of forty thousand men, leaving the major part of his force to guard the Rhine, to meet an army of one hundred thousand men.<sup>124</sup> Although these figures may be an exaggeration on the part of both authors, it is likely that the force of Maxentius was considerably larger than that of Constantine's. Constantine, however, had proven to be a more able and disciplined general than Maxentius, thus, giving him some advantage over Maxentius.

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<sup>122</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 44, p. 318; Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 32, p. 492; Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 4, p. 529; Anonymous Valesianus, c. 12, p. 515; Nazarius, c. 17, p. 595 and c. 21, p. 597, c. 22, p. 597, c. 25, p. 599, c. 26, p. 600.

<sup>123</sup>Zosimus, Historia Nova, Bk. 2, c. 18, p. 60.

<sup>124</sup>"Incerti Panegyricus, Constantino Augustus (313 A.D.)," c. 3, p. 657 and c. 5, p. 658, Patrologia Latina, Vol. VIII, 1844.

The victory over Maxentius in 313 had reduced the number of emperors in the empire to three. After his victory in Rome, Constantine went to Milan where he met Licinius and formed a mutual alliance.<sup>125</sup> After that Constantine returned to Gaul to tend to the internal affairs of his section. While the two emperors were meeting in Milan, the third emperor, Daja, found it a good time to strike at Licinius.<sup>126</sup> The two forces met near Heraclea and Daja was defeated, thus, leaving two emperors in charge of the empire.<sup>127</sup>

In the following year (314), Licinius and Constantine were at war with each other after Constantine found out that Licinius was plotting a revolt against him.<sup>128</sup> The result of this first war between Licinius and

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<sup>125</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 45, p. 318-319; Anonymous Valesianus, c. 13, p. 517; Zosimus, Bk. 2, c. 17, p. 62. At this time, Licinius and Constantine drew up the famous Edict of Milan, which will be discussed later in the paper. For Edict of Milan see: Lactantius, "De Mortibus...", c. 48, p. 320; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 10, c. 5, pp. 379-380.

<sup>126</sup>Lactantius "De mortibus...", c. 45, p. 318-319.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., c. 49, p. 321; Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 28, p. 498.

<sup>128</sup>Anonymous Valesianus says that, when Constantine demanded the author of the plot from Licinius, Licinius refused and threw down the statues of Constantine as the major cause of the war. Anonymous Valesianus, Excerta Valesiana, c. 20, p. 521. Eusebius says that Licinius first tried treachery to do away with Constantine, and when that did not work he started intrigues against the Christians, who he knew Constantine "favored." Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 50-51, p. 496. The word "favored" is an overstatement on the part of Eusebius, and it is one of those occasions where he has attempted to present Constantine as a converted Christian. "Sympathized" might have been a more concise word for him to have used, if in fact he actually sympathized with them at this stage of his life. Eutropius mentions only one motive for this war and that is that Constantine proceeded to make war against Licinius in order to obtain "the sovereignty of the whole world." Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 5, pp. 529-530. This is no doubt a true motive, but it may also be assumed that sympathy towards the Christians may also have been the excuse he was looking for, in order to take control of the entire empire.

Constantine was the defeat of Licinius and the re-division of the Empire, with Constantine taking control of Illyrium along with the other western provinces already in his possession.<sup>129</sup> A truce followed between these two emperors for a period of nine years, and in 323 war broke out between the two emperors once more. This time Licinius was removed from the scene permanently, leaving Constantine the sole possessor of the Roman Empire.<sup>130</sup> In 325, Constantine ordered the council of Nicaea, thus, Christianizing the Empire.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 1, c. 6, p. 243; Orosius, Historiarum Liber Septimus, c. 28, pp. 1134-1137, in Patrologia Latina, Vol. 31, 1857.

<sup>130</sup> One cannot give a definite answer as to the exact cause of this war, but Eusebius says that Licinius had continued his persecutions against the Christians and Constantine began a crusade on behalf of the Christians. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 10, c. 9, pp. 386-387. Whether it was a legitimate crusade by Constantine or whether he used the Christians as an excuse to go to war against Licinius out of personal ambition cannot be determined from Eusebius. That Licinius had conducted persecutions against the Christians is evidenced by: Eusebius, Sozomen, Anonymous Valesianus and Orosius. Eusebius, Vita Constantini, c. 50-51, p. 496; Anonymous Valesianus, "The Lineage of the Emperor Constantine," in Excerta Valesiana, c. 20, p. 521; Orosius, Historiarum Liber Septimus, c. 28, pp. 1134-1137; Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History; Bk. 1, c. 6, p. 243.

<sup>131</sup> Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 3, c. 6, p. 521.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF CONSTANTINE

The Council of Nicaea seems to have been the turning point in Constantine's life, and his Christianizing of the empire seems to go against all apparent logic on the part of Constantine. He had shown no true Christian affiliation before 325 A.D., although his Christian authors attempt to show a slow transformation on his religious beliefs between 312 and 325 A.D. There is no evidence available which proves that he had any Christian affiliation before 312 A.D. Likewise, there is no evidence which proves that his parents were Christians.

How was it possible, then, for this magnanimous figure of history to change the whole character of the empire in such a short period of time? What motive, what force, what power led him to reach such a decision? The whole complexion of the Roman government had been changed relatively overnight. It changed from persecutions of Christians by the Roman government to one of favoring the Christians; and eventually to one of persecutions against non Christians by the same government. The answers to these questions can only be found if one traces Constantine's life prior 325 A.D., and what relations, if any, he had with the Christians.

Historically, Constantine enters the scene in 293 A.D., when Eusebius first saw him with Diocletian in Palestine.<sup>132</sup> Oddly enough, there

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<sup>132</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 19, p. 487.

is no substantial evidence to determine exactly when Constantine came in direct contact with Christians. It is known, however, that he spent thirteen years in the Court of Diocletian which is known to have had Christians serving in official positions. It is possible, therefore, and most probably so, that he did come in contact with Christians while in Diocletian's court. There is no evidence to validate the statement that although he had come in contact with Christians he had in fact become a Christian. The only inclination given to us about his religious character before 312 A.D. is given by the Panegyrist in 307 who exclaims that Constantine had inherited his father's piety and monotheism.<sup>133</sup> If that was truly the case, then Constantine should have been a member of the cult of Mithras as was his father.

The question which must be asked at this time is: "Was Constantine a Christian?" The answer, judging from his actions, is definitely "no." In support of this statement, it is necessary to look back on the discussion found in chapter one. Constantine, throughout his life as depicted by Eusebius, was sent to the world by God in order to establish God's Church. In addition, his alleged vision of the cross, accepted by the Christian writers (Lactantius, Eusebius, Athanasius, Sozomen, Socrates, etc.) was a sign sent to him by God to take up the sword and fight for God. An examination of these events and a comparison to statements in the Gospel

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<sup>133</sup>"Panegyricus, Maximiano et Constantino Dictus," in Patrologia Latina, Vol. 8, 1844, c. 5, p. 613. The Panegyrist in no way is suggesting that Constantine was a Christian at this time, but merely states that he was a monotheist.

reveal a major contradiction and a change in the beliefs from the Apostolic Age to the fourth century.

In the Gospel of St. John, for example, when Pilate asked Jesus if he was King of the Jews the response was: "My Kingdom is not of this world: if my Kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my Kingdom not from hence."<sup>134</sup> In another statement already mentioned in chapter one, Jesus tells his listeners to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are Gods."<sup>135</sup> Again in another instance in the Gospel of St. Matthew, when Jesus was about to be taken by the soldiers, one of Jesus' followers drew a sword, and cut off the ear of one of the high priest's servants. Jesus response to this act of violence was "Put up thy sword into its place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."<sup>136</sup> Throughout the Gospels Jesus is reported as preaching compassion towards one's fellow man: "Blessed are the merciful; Blessed are the peacemakers, etc."<sup>137</sup>

Constantine in no way appears to have been a peacemaker. That the Christians obtained peace as a result of his triumph would be correct to say. At the same time, however, peace did not come to the pagans and Jews living in the Empire.

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<sup>134</sup>St. John, 18:36, p. 284.

<sup>135</sup>St. Mark, 12:15-17, p. 121.

<sup>136</sup>St. Matthew, 26:52, p. 76. John in 18:10, names the individual who drew the sword to have been Peter.

<sup>137</sup>St. Matthew, 5:2-12, pp. 8-9.

A true Christian is a merciful individual, and there seem to be very few individuals around who practice mercy. Licinius, who was adorned by Lactantius at one time, had no mercy for the son of Daja, a boy eight years old; the daughter of Daja, a girl seven years old, when he had them killed "according to the just judgment of God."<sup>138</sup> Constantine, regarded to have been a Christian by the Church Fathers of the fourth century, ordered the death of his son Crispus, his sister's son, his wife Fausta and many of his friends, in 326. The cause for this action by Constantine is not very clear. The two major interpretations are given by Eutropius and Zosimus, and both of these men do not appear to be well versed of this subject.

Eutropius remarks that "...the pride of prosperity caused Constantine greatly to depart from his former agreeable mildness of temper. Falling first upon his own relatives, he put to death his son...; his sister's son...; his wife, and subsequently many of his friends."<sup>139</sup> The only conclusion that can be drawn from this statement is that Constantine uncovered a plot against him initiated by Crispus and supported by all the others, thus, putting them to death.

Zosimus on the other hand, raises another theory that Constantine put Crispus, his son by a concubine named Minervina, and Fausta to death on

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<sup>138</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 50, p. 321. Licinius is here mentioned only because Lactantius, a Christian who loved Constantine, says that the children of Daja were killed, along with their mother, by the "unerring and just judgment of God." Is this the just God in which Lactantius, the man who considered Constantine a man of God, the same God who is mentioned in the Gospel? I think not.

<sup>139</sup>Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 6, p. 530.

the grounds of their suspected adultery.<sup>140</sup> Zosimus also continues to say that after the deaths of Crispus and Fausta, Constantine repented, and being smitten with guilt he looked for a religion to expiate this guilt. Having found no other religion that was prepared to purge him of his sin, he turned to the God of the Christians and there he found peace.<sup>141</sup> The fact that Zosimus puts Constantine's conversion in 326 makes this theory unreliable since Constantine had participated in Christian affairs prior the year 326. Furthermore, Eutropius' assertion is not clear enough to make any final determination on why Constantine went to the extremes of killing his son and his wife. Consequently, the lack of evidence can only force one to theorize that either a political plot was under construction by Crispus to usurp the government, or some other reason unknown to us as yet. What ever the cause for this order given by Constantine, it does not coincide with the Apostolic teachings in the Gospel.

To continue the discussion that Constantine was not a true Christian, in the beginning of his reign as sole emperor Constantine, by the testimony of Eusebius, compelled no one to be a Christian but prayed that all may be Christians.<sup>142</sup> In the later years of his reign, by the testimony of the same author, Constantine apparently changed his policy of toleration towards the non Christians of the empire. First, he began a policy of religious

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<sup>140</sup>Zosimus, Historia Nova, Bk. 2, c. 29, p. 71.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid., Bk. 2, c. 29, p. 71.

<sup>142</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 2, c. 61, p. 513.

persecution against the pagans in the empire by ordering the destruction of their temples, and later made it unlawful to pray to any god other than the Christian God.<sup>143</sup> Such an action could not have been taken by a true Christian as described in the Gospels.

Constantine had witnessed the persecutions of the Christians, and later in his reign it appears that he along with the Church Fathers of the fourth century took revenge against the one time oppressors of the Christians. Moreover, Lactantius' essay "De mortibus persecutorum," was one showing a vindictive God rather than a merciful one. He was a God who had punished the persecutors through horrible deaths; took away their imperial rule, while Constantine, God's representative on earth was successful and reigned to a peaceful death.

If it is incorrect, therefore, to categorize Constantine as a true Christian, it would be just as incorrect to categorize him a non-Christian as Burckhardt has done.<sup>144</sup> Certainly, Constantine's ambition for power cannot be disregarded. That Constantine was an energetic individual whose main goal was to rule the empire has to be taken into account. On the other hand, how could Christianizing the empire help Constantine in achieving his goal, if religion played no role whatsoever in his mind, as Burckhardt suggests.

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<sup>143</sup>Ibid., Bk. 3, c. 54-58, pp. 534-535.

<sup>144</sup>In view of the policy of Constantine towards the Christians, Burckhardt's statement describing Constantine as a genius whose main concern was ambition and lust for power, and was totally irreligious cannot be considered as a valid theory. Compare Burckhardt's description of Constantine's religious character in The Age of Constantine..., p. 292, with Constantine's Christian policy.

Although, Constantine by no means can be used as a model Christian, it is necessary to say at this time that neither could the Church leaders of his time be used as model Christians.<sup>145</sup> It must be kept in mind that the Church leaders were the ones who accepted Constantine to be a Christian, as can be seen by the writings of Eusebius, Athanasius, Lactantius, Sozomen, Socrates, etc. If in the mind of Burckhardt, therefore, Constantine was not a Christian and religion played a minor role in his life, then what could be said about the Church Fathers of the fourth century who accepted him and wrote about him?

That Constantine was not a true Christian has been discussed to a small degree. If that was the case then Constantine's policy towards the Christians and the institutionalized Church of the fourth century certainly brings out some contradictions towards the previous statement. If it is wrong to say that he was a true Christian, therefore, and similarly wrong to say that he was irreligious,<sup>146</sup> then, the half way point would be that he was a Christian of his time--a Christian of the fourth century Church.

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<sup>145</sup>The Church by the fourth century had evolved to a political as well as social and religious institution, and had changed radically from the first century Church of Peter. The fourth century Christian leaders do not parallel the Christian leaders of the Apostolic Age. See Chapter I.

<sup>146</sup>Burckhardt's statement that Constantine was "irreligious" has been challenged by N.H. Baynes. Baynes maintains that Burckhardt's statement was pre-judged, and that when one attempts to understand a man of the past, "...he must be regarded against the background of his world, that he can only be fairly judged in the light of the standards and the values of the society in which he lived." N.H. Baynes, Constantine the Great and the Christian Church, p. 2. Ferdinand M. Lot, remarks with respect to the age of Constantine that, "...in this age there were no such persons as free thinkers." F. Lot, The End of the Ancient World..., p. 34. What he is saying is that during that period there were no irreligious persons living in the Roman world. M. Louis Duchesne, makes this statement with regard to certain letters dispatched in the name of the emperor in 313: "We cannot admire too much the artless simplicity of certain critics, who approach this imperial

A look into Constantine's religious policy towards the Christians will prove the above statement to be true. The trend of his policy will show that at first he showed no preference towards any religious group. As time went on, however, his views changed towards favoring the Christians, and opposing all other religious groups. This change in policy on the part of Constantine could only have been caused, through the persistent direction and advice of the fourth century Church leaders.

The first indication we possess of Constantine's interest towards the Christians is found in the edict of toleration declared by Galerius, Constantine and Licinius in 311. In it, the edict declares religious freedom to the Christians, "on condition that nothing be done by them contrary to discipline. In another letter we shall indicate to the magistrates what they have done to observe."<sup>147</sup>

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literature with the preconceived idea that it was impossible for an emperor to have religious convictions: that men Constantine, Constantius, or Julian, were in reality free-thinkers, who, for political exigencies, openly proclaimed such and such opinions. In the fourth century, free thinkers, if there were any, were rara avis, whose existence could not be assumed or easily accepted." M.L. Duchesne, Early Hist..., Vol. II, p. 48, note #2. Johannes A. Straub, "Constantine as κοινός επισκοπος," says that "...scholars have learned to understand" F. Lot's statement about free-thinkers in the Roman world. "A better insight into the nature of Roman politics had been gained and there was no longer any doubt about the traditional coalition and the really inseparable connection between politics and religion. Diocletian, for example, had proclaimed: 'The immortal gods will favour, as they always did, the Roman Empire, if we can be sure that all the inhabitants of our Empire devote themselves to a pious, religious, quiet and chaste way of life.' Relying on the same principle, Galerius had justified his edict of toleration: 'Hence, in accordance with our pardon, it will be the duty of the Christians to pray to their God for our safety and that the commonwealth and their own, that the commonwealth may be secure in every respect.' Two years later, Constantine held the conviction that 'the lawful revival and protection of the worship in which the highest reverence of the most heavenly power is maintained had caused the greatest good fortune to the Roman name and exceptional prosperity to all affairs of men!'" Straub's remarks are in direct response to Burckhardt's use of the word "irreligious" for Constantine. Johannes A. Straub, "Constantine as κοινός επισκοπος," in Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Vol. 21 (Locust Valley, N.Y.: J.J. Augustin, 1967), p. 39.

<sup>147</sup> Eusebius, Eccles. Hist., Bk. 8, c. 17, p. 340.

The letter which Galerius refers to is lost. An indication is given in the edict of Milan (313), however, as to what it was the magistrates had to observe. It appears from this edict that certain conditions were attached to the edict of 313, and that the Christians were obliged to pay a certain amount, either to the government or the occupants, if they wanted their property restored to them. It is stated in the edict of 313 by Constantine that the government will take over the expense involved in the transfer henceforth.<sup>148</sup> In the edict of 311, there is no indication that Constantine had declared himself a follower of the Christian God or any god for that matter. It merely appears that religious freedom, once an important element, had been restored to the Roman Empire.

According to the Christian writers, Eusebius, Lactantius, Sozomen, etc., the first time Constantine truly came into contact with the Christian God was in 312, just before his battle with Maxentius. It is at this time that the Christian writers report Constantine to have been converted to Christianity. There appears to be some controversy with regard to Constantine's alleged overnight conversion as the Christian writers declare.

The conversion of Constantine involves a certain vision which Eusebius and Lactantius, both contemporaries to Constantine, along with their followers report Constantine to have experienced prior the battle of the Milvian bridge against Maxentius in 312. This is the alleged and infamous "vision of the cross" in the sky, along with the words HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS (conquer by this).

There are many different descriptions of this alleged vision and many different interpretations. Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History, which

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<sup>148</sup>Ibid., Bk. 10, c. 5, p. 379.

was written about 324 A.D.,<sup>149</sup> does not mention the vision, but he does report it in his Vita Constantini, which was written between 337-340.<sup>150</sup> In his Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius merely says that Constantine had embraced the Christian God and obtained victory through God. In Vita Constantini, he says that Constantine related the incident to him long after the victory and that he was reporting it as Constantine related it to him.<sup>151</sup>

Eusebius first relates that in order to win the battle,

...he (Constantine) needed some more powerful aid than his military forces could afford him, on accounts of the wicked and magical enchantments which were so diligently practiced by the tyrant (Maxentius), he sought divine assistance.... He considered, therefore, on what God he might rely for protection and assistance.<sup>152</sup>

According to Eusebius, Constantine's decision was based on the simple method of deduction, where he studied each of his predecessors and found that those who had put their faith in many gods, had met with "an unhappy end."<sup>153</sup>

This might very well be how it happened, but if Constantine truly went in search of a diety and chose the Christian God he may very easily have been convinced by Christian advisors to do so.

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<sup>149</sup>Because of certain events which Eusebius relates, the date of the completion of his Ecclesiastical History has been set at 324 A.D. It is important to note that in Bk. 9, c. 9, pp. 363-364, where Eusebius mentions the battle, he says nothing of a vision.

<sup>150</sup>Eusebius' Vita Constantini was written between 337-34. Eusebius relates to the vision in Bk. 1, c. 28, p. 489-490.

<sup>151</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 28, p. 290.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid., Bk. 1, c. 28, p. 289.

<sup>153</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 27, p. 489.

Socrates' interpretation of these events are not much different from that of Eusebius, for he declares that Constantine, "debated as to what divinity's aid he should invoke in the conduct of the war."<sup>154</sup> Socrates reaches the same conclusions as Eusebius, for he says that he studied those who had put their faith in other gods and that they had failed.<sup>155</sup>

Lactantius on the other hand, in his "De mortibus persecutorum," fails to mention anything concerning Constantine's search for a diety to help him in his battle against Maxentius.<sup>156</sup> Eutropius mentions nothing concerning either a conversion or a search for a diety on the part of Constantine, in 312.<sup>157</sup> Meanwhile, Anonymous Valesianus, who declares Constantine to have been "the first Christian emperor....,"<sup>158</sup> mentions the battle of the Milvian bridge but has nothing to say with respect to a diety, a vision, or an instant conversion.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>154</sup>Socrates, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 1, c. 2, p. 2.

<sup>155</sup>Ibid., p. 2; Sozomen also seems to agree with this view. See: Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 1, c. 3, p. 241.

<sup>156</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus persecutorum," c. 44, p. 318.

<sup>157</sup>Eutropius, Abridgement..., Bk. 10, c. 4, p. 529.

<sup>158</sup>Anonymous Valesianus, "The Lineage of the Emperor Constantine," Bk. 6, c. 33, p. 529.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid., c. 12, p. 515.

Eusebius continues his tale in Vita Constantini, by saying that

Constantine saw a vision in the heavens:

He (Constantine) 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, HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS, (conquer by this). At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle."<sup>160</sup>

There appears to be a great deal of discrepancy concerning this famous vision of Constantine. Eusebius describes it as a vision, seen by Constantine as well as his troops. Lactantius in "De mortibus persecutorum," describes it in the form of a dream and makes no mention of a public vision.<sup>161</sup> Socrates in his Ecclesiastical History, says that Constantine saw a vision publically, along with every one around him.<sup>162</sup> Sozomen in his Ecclesiastical History, gives the most glamorous description of all, when he describes the vision taking place in the middle of the day. He says that "some holy angels who were standing by, exclaimed, 'Oh, Constantine! by this symbol, Conquer!'"<sup>163</sup> Eutropius, however, makes no mention of such a vision; nor does Anonymous Valesianus; nor does Ammianus Marcellinus. The Panegyric of 313 describes Constantine's victory over Maxentius as being assisted by some divine power.<sup>164</sup> If in fact such a vision, whether a heavenly sign or a natural phenomenon, did take place and it was seen by Constantine's army, it would have been talked about for many years. Eusebius, himself, would not have had to wait for Constantine to relate him such a tale years later. It is tales such as this one which forces one to consider Eusebius' testimony as unreliable at times.

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<sup>160</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 1, c. 28, p. 490.

<sup>161</sup>Lactantius, "De mortibus...", c. 44, p. 318

<sup>162</sup>Socrates, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 1, c. 2, pp. 1-2.

<sup>163</sup>Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 1, c. 3, p. 241.

<sup>164</sup>"Incerti Panegyricus, Constantino Augusti 313," in Patrologia Latina, Vol. 8, 1844, c. 4, p. 658.

In view of the many discrepancies evolving around this alleged vision, I tend to rule out this entire event as nothing more, than a tale, invented either by Eusebius or Constantine himself in order to give legitimacy to the rule of Constantine, that he was the one chosen by God. The reasoning behind this is that if in fact there was some true manifestation of such a miracle in 312, there would have been others reporting the event besides the Christian Church Fathers. The disagreement among the contemporary historians with regard to this alleged miracle is one example which depicts Constantine to be a Christian of his time, but there is still more. If in fact Constantine's conversion was as sudden as the Church Fathers insist upon it as being it did not begin to manifest itself for quite some time. It is my contention that Constantine may very well have searched for some diety to aid him in battle, but, whether he chose the Christian God as his champion or whether he chose many gods cannot be determined. Nor could his true religious inclinations be determined from this lone event. It is evident, however, that his total conversion took some time to develop through the help of his Christian advisors, for it was not until 325 A.D., a period of twelve years before he fully accepted Christianity when he presided before the Council of Nicaea.

During those twelve years Constantine does involve himself in the affairs of the Christians, but, this is not his only preoccupation as it appears to be after 325 A.D. An examination of these events proves this point to be true.

In 313 A.D. Constantine and Licinius signed the famous "Edict of Milan," and in it although the Christians are mentioned, the benefit of the

Empire as a whole seems to be the main point as it gives religious freedom to all citizens of the Empire.<sup>165</sup> There is no evidence in this Edict which proves Constantine to have been a converted Christian as Eusebius declares in his Vita Constantini resulting from the famous "vision of the cross" incident.

His involvement in the affairs of the Church, however, is evident and the assertion mentioned earlier<sup>166</sup> of the power and organization of the Christians within the empire and within the Imperial rule as observed by Diocletian is also evident.

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<sup>165</sup>Both Lactantius and Eusebius agree on the basic purpose of the "Edict of Milan." Lactantius relates the Edict in this manner: "When we, Constantine and Licinius, emperors, had an interview at Milan, and conferred together with respect to the good and security of the commonweal, it seemed to us 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;..."Lactantius "De mortibus...", c. 34, p. 315. Caution should be given as to why only the Christians are mentioned by name; that being that they were the ones being persecuted. Eusebius states it in the following manner:

"Perceiving long ago that religious liberty ought not to be denied, but that it ought to be granted to the judgment and desire of each individual to perform his religious duties according to his own choice, we had given orders that every man, Christians as well as others, should preserve the faith of his own sect and religion.... When I, Constantine Augustus, and I, Licinius Augustus, came under favorable auspices to Milan and took under consideration everything which pertained to the common weal and prosperity, we resolved among other things, or rather first of all, to make such decrees as seemed in many respects for the benefit of every one; namely, such as should preserve reverence and piety toward the diety. We resolved, that is, to grant both the Christians and to all men freedom to follow the religion which they choose, that whatever heavenly divinity exists may be propitious to us and to all that live under our government. We have, therefore, determined, with sound and upright purpose, that liberty is to be denied to no one, to choose and to follow the religious observances of the Christians, but that to each one freedom is to be given to devote his mind to that religion which he may think adapted to himself, in order that the Diety may exhibit to us in all things his accustomed care and favor..." Eusebius, Ecclesiastical Hist..., c. 5, p. 379. The key phrase in this is "whatever heavenly divinity," in that Eusebius is relating this Edict not in Vita Constantini, but in his Ecclesiastical History, thus, depicting that Constantine did not adhere to any particular god and especially the Christian God at this time.

<sup>166</sup>See page 50 in text.

In the year 313 A.D. Constantine was petitioned by Anulinus,<sup>167</sup> to rule on a matter of the most controvercial sects of the Christian Church, the Donatists. Constantine acted upon this by recommending that a synod of bishops be held in Rome to discuss and reach judgment upon the matter.<sup>168</sup> When the judgment went against the Donatists in 313 and then again at another council in 314 at Arles they appealed directly to Constantine and he heard their case in Milan in 316.<sup>169</sup> Thus, it has become somewhat evident at this time that the Christians in order to be able to petition to a Roman emperor for him to decide on Christological problems had to feel a certain amount of loyalty and trust towards him. On the other hand, for Constantine to take time to preside on a Christian matter had to be closer to the Christians at this time than he was before the alleged vision.

Constantine's conversion appears to have taken place sometime between 316 A.D. and 325 A.D. the year which Christianized the Roman world. There is little evidence to account for this, in fact almost none. There is some evidence, however, that Constantine may have been talked into becoming a Christian by Christians found in his court, as Diocletian had Christians in his. The only evidence that can account for this is the mention of Hosius,

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<sup>167</sup> Anulinus, proconsul of Africa, wrote an epistle to Constantine on April 13, 313 on behalf of the Donatists to rule upon the validity of Caecilianus', bishop of Carthage, ordainment. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 10, c. 5, p. 381. See also, St. Augustine, "A treatise concerning the correction of the Donatists," trans. by Rev. J.R. King, M.A., in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV, c. 1-2, pp.634-635.

<sup>168</sup> For further reading on this matter see Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 10, c. 5, p. 380-81.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., Bk. 10, c. 5, p. 380, note #16.

later to be Bishop of Cordova, in one of the Panegyrist's that he was one of Constantine's advisors even before his Italian campaign.<sup>170</sup> It is also suggested that Eusebius, himself, had met and befriended Constantine as early as 297 A.D., that in Palestine when Constantine passed through there with Diocletian.<sup>171</sup> While the evidence regarding whether Constantine had Christian advisors or not may be scarce, the fact that the Christians were well organized throughout the eastern part of the Empire is well known.<sup>172</sup>

In 325 A.D., Constantine called together the Christian bishops at the Council of Nicaea.<sup>173</sup> By this time it had become apparent that Constantine was a converted Christian of his time. Whether he called the council together to solidify his empire and used Christianity as the catalyst out of mere lust for power, or whether he was truly a pious Christian plays a minor role. The reasoning behind this is that if he was an individual whose lust for power was to utilize the Christians for his own ends, then the reverse is true about the Christian bishops who accepted this man to be their leader. Thus, making Constantine and the bishops, Christians of the fourth century Church, men of their times and not Christians in the true sense of the word as described by the Apostolic fathers. During this council which

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<sup>170</sup>The Panegyrist 307 mentions Hosius in c. 5, in Patrologia Latina, Vol. 8, 1844. There is also evidence that during the Council of Nicaea, and also later, Hosius presided in the place of Constantine during Constantine's absence. The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church; Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, second series, Vol. XIV, edited by Phillip Schaff, and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), p. 13.

<sup>171</sup>This assertion is made by the Rev. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Ph.D., in "Prolegomena" of Eusebius, Ecclesiastical Hist..., p. 9, which may explain as to why Eusebius became bishop of Caesaria after 313 A.D.

<sup>172</sup>For the entire history on the Council of Nicaea see The Seven Ecumenical Councils, of the Undivided Church, in Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV.

<sup>173</sup>See the discussion on this in Chapter II.

Constantine took part in and presided over, the major subject over discussion was on the celebration of Easter. This was a controvercial subject among the Christians and had caused a schism among them in the past. And yet, Constantine took an active role in bringing about a harmonius union among the Christian bishops.<sup>174</sup>

Constantine's day to day conversion became even more intensified after the council as his views changed from religious toleration to religious persecution.<sup>175</sup> His first religious persecutions were against the Jews of the Empire concerning the celebration of Easter, and at what time of the year it should be celebrated. In a letter to those bishops not present at the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), Constantine stated:

...and first of all, it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defied their hands with enormous sin, and are therefore, deservedly qfflicted with blindness of soul.... Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd.<sup>176</sup>

Later on Constantine carried out actual persecutions of the Jews, first by sentencing to death at the stake all persons (Jews) who in anyway take part in persecuting any Jew who is or may be a convert to Christianity. In the second part of the same law Constantine made it a crime to become a Jew. Still in another part of the same law he made it illegal for a Jew to have a non Jewish slave; "and any Jew who circumcised a slave who was either a Christian or a member of any other non-Jewish religion, forfeited the slave."<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 3, c. 7, p. 521.

<sup>175</sup>This obviously was an influence on the part of his Christian advisors.

<sup>176</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 3, c. 18, p. 524.

<sup>177</sup>James Parkes, The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue, a Study in the Origins of Antisemitism (Atheneum, New York: A Temple Book, 1969) p. 179. Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 4, c. 27, p. 547. The triumph of one religious group (the Christians) commenced the bloody persecution and almost destruction of another (the Jews). How ironic that these persecutions took place in the hands of Christians.

Constantine's persecutions continued against all non Christians as he first ordered the destruction of places of "idol worship" and in their places he ordered the building of Christian Churches, as the case in Mambre. In a letter to Eusebius Constantine declares that "...every idol which shall be found in the place above mentioned shall immediately be consigned to the flames; that the altar be utterly demolished; and that if any one, after this our mandate, shall be guilty of impiety of any kind in this place, he shall be visited with condign punishment."<sup>178</sup>

According to Eusebius Constantine even went further than that when he says that "...he used every means to rebuke the superstitious errors of the heathen. Hence, the entrances of their temples in the several cities were left exposed to the weather, being stripped of their doors at his command; the tiling of others was removed, and their doors destroyed...."<sup>179</sup>

Constantine went even one step further as he became even more "religious?" and as the Christian bishops influenced him even more. He ordered the use of military force in the destruction of non-Christian temples. In an attempt to show the magnificence of Constantine as a true Christian, concerning a temple dedicated to Venus on Mount Lebanon, Eusebius narrates that "...these proceedings, could not escape the vigilance of our August emperor,...accordingly, in obedience to the imperial command, these engines of an impure superstition were immediately abolished, and the hand of military force was made instrument in purging the place..."<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup>Ibid., Bk. 4, c. 53, p. 533.

<sup>179</sup>Ibid., Bk. 4, c. 54, p. 534.

<sup>180</sup>Ibid., Bk. 4, c. 54, p. 534.

It appears at this point that Constantine took a complete turn in his beliefs, and where at one point he showed no Christian beliefs at all and merely advocated religious freedom for all in the Empire, he now favors one sect and persecutes all others. Moreover, where Lactantius and Eusebius condemned the Emperors who persecuted the Christians, both Eusebius and Lactantius now present Constantine as a champion. The one time persecuted and children of God, have in a short span of time become the persecutors of the one time persecutors.

In another instance Eusebius informs us that Constantine even went to the extreme of issuing an Edict against the "Heretics" in which he made it illegal to assemble and conduct "idol worship," and also he deprived them of all temples and houses of assembly. In addition, in the same Edict he made it illegal for anyone, to hold services in public or private which were for "idol worship."<sup>181</sup>

Such actions on the part of Constantine, nullify any assertion made by Burckhardt that Constantine had no religion whatsoever. Religion is a mere belief, but whether it was a pure belief or not cannot be determined. It is determinable, however, that whether a man's religion is pure or distorted, as in the case of Constantine, he does indeed believe in such a religion and expresses such beliefs in his actions. Furthermore, the acceptance of such actions by others who are supposedly of the same kinship make a person's religion quite true to him.

The last act which Constantine committed, thus making him a Christian of his time is that of his baptism. Throughout his reign as Emperor of the Roman world, Constantine conducted himself as what he conceived to be a Christian. In 337 A.D. on his deathbed, however, he received the "Rite"

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., Bk. 3, c. 65, p. 539.

of baptism. The statement according to modern standards could easily be made that, since he waited so long to receive this sacrament, Constantine was not a Christian. Edward Gibbon, however, informs us, that this idea of waiting until just before death to receive baptism was not new, but common practice among many in the past. The theory behind this was "supposed to contain a full and absolute expiation of sin; and the soul was instantly restored to its original purity, and entitled to the promise of eternal salvation...."<sup>182</sup>

It appears that prolonged baptism was not an uncommon practice in the fourth century. Ludwig Hertling and Engelbert Kirschbaum inform us that "in the fourth century solemn preparation for baptism reached its peak."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup>E. Gibbon says with regard to Constantine's late baptism: "The pride of Constantine, who refused the privileges of a catechumen, cannot easily be explained or excused: but the delay of his baptism may be justified by the Maxims and practice of ecclesiastical antiquity. The sacrament of baptism was supposed to contain a full and absolute expiation of sin; and the soul was instantly restored to its original purity, and entitled to the promise of eternal salvation. Among the proselytes of Christianity, there were many who judged it imprudent to precipitate a salutary rite, which could not be repeated; to throw away an inestimable privilege, which could never be recovered." E. Gibbon, Decline and Fall..., Vol. 1, c. 20, p. 553.

<sup>183</sup>Hertling and Kirschbaum, The Roman Catacombs and Their Martyrs, p. 137. There is an excellent Chapter on baptism in this book and it gives a detailed account on late baptism rites. Reference here is made to the distinction made between the ordinary catechumens and the competentes, or photizomenoi. Mention is also given to individuals who awaited until late in their lives to receive baptism namely: St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, Constantine, Constantine's son Constantius, the prefect of Constantinople, Junius Bassus. Also inscriptions found in the city from the fourth century include, a man named Boniface who died in 397 at age forty as a catechumen; a Greek Andragathos, a thirty five year old catechumen; a Sozomena, who was overtaken by death as an audiens, that is a catechumen, and there are others, pp. 137-38. See also St. Augustine, Confessions, in Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, Bk. 1, c. 11, p. 50. See also: Alexander Campbell, Christian Baptism with its Antecedents and Consequents (Nashville, Tenn.: Gospel Advocate Co., 1951); Lorna Brockett, The Theology of Baptism (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fibes Publishing, Inc., 1971); Rollin Stely Armour, Anabaptist Baptism: A Representative Study (Scottsdale, Penna.: Herald Press, 1966); Frederick Dale Bruner, A Theology of the Holy Spirit, The Pentecostal Experience and the New Testament Witness (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans/Publisher, 1970); T.C. Akeley, Christian Initiation in Spain, c. 300-1100 (London: Darton, Lougman and Todd, Ltd., 1967).

This preparation included catechetical instruction, memorization of the Creed, repeated blessings, exorcisms, and other liturgical ceremonies, usually during the Easter holidays.<sup>184</sup>

Eusebius attests to this theory when he describes the events during Constantine's baptism. "Being at length convinced," he says, "that his life was drawing to a close, he felt the time was come at which he should seek purification from sins of his past career, firmly believing that whatever errors he had committed as a mortal man, his soul would be purified from them through the efficacy of the mystical words and the salutary waters of baptism."<sup>185</sup> Constantine's own statement in this case, if Eusebius could be trusted to be accurate, seems to agree with the theory that Constantine was a Christian of his time. "The time is arrived which I have long hoped for, with an earnest desire and prayer that I might obtain the salvation of God. The hour is come in which I too may have the blessing of that seal which confers immortality; the hour in which I may receive the seal of salvation...."<sup>186</sup> Thus, Constantine according to this statement had been waiting and preparing for baptism and when time had reached its course he welcomed it to obtain the "salvation of God," and "immortality."

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<sup>184</sup>Hertling and Kirschbaum, The Roman Catacombs..., p. 136.

<sup>185</sup>Eusebius, Vita Constantini, Bk. 4, c. 6, p. 556. If Eusebius could be trusted in this one passage, the phrase "...firmly believing that whatever errors he had committed..." seems to be a key phrase in that Constantine believed that obtaining baptism was the right thing to do.

<sup>186</sup>Ibid., Bk. 4, c. 62, p. 556.

Baptism was the essential element which he needed for the purification of his soul. According to Rev. Monteiro no other sacrament could have taken the place of baptism. As far as extreme unction is concerned, one could not participate in this rite unless he had received the rite of baptism. The "annointment of the sick" as it is called today is not a necessity for an individual, whereas, baptism is.<sup>187</sup> Rev. Monteiro's statement is in agreement with Edward Gibbon when he declares that "the sacrament of baptism was supposed to contain a full and absolute expiation of sin...."<sup>188</sup> It appears that Constantine wanted to be cleansed totally of all sin, and thus requested to be baptized.

Extreme unction, on the other hand, which according to Rev. Monteiro was first mentioned by St. James in a letter to another Christian as the annointment of the sick, has the sole purpose of cleansing the senses of the body. Baptism is the sacrament responsible for cleansing the soul, as well as the senses. Constantine, therefore, needed to be baptised not only to be inducted formally into the Christian Church, but also to have his soul cleansed along with his senses.

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<sup>187</sup>This answer was provided by Rev. Monteiro; obtained on a personal interview on August 6, 1975 at 7:00 p.m.

<sup>188</sup>E. Gibbon, Decline and Fall...., c. 20, p. 553.

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### CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this paper has accomplished its purpose in showing that Constantine was a Christian of his time, and not a true Christian as such. Throughout the paper it may have appeared that Constantine was not to blame for his actions against the non Christian community in the Empire. It may even appear that total blame should be put upon the Church Fathers. This was not intentional, however, for Constantine as Emperor must accept and history must set upon him full blame. Whether his actions were selfish, or whether they were a direct expression of the influence his Christian advisors impressed upon him, it is of little importance. The fact that he Christianized the Empire at the bloody and painful expence of others within the Empire, and such actions were fully accepted by the Church Fathers make him a Christian of his time.

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