# When Our World Became Christian

## 312-394

Paul Veyne

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*For Lucien Jerphagnon, and in memory of Claude Roy*

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TRANSLATED BY JANET LLOYD

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First published in French as *Quand notre monde est devenu chrétien*


Ouvrage publié avec le soutien du Centre national du livre – ministère français chargé de la culture

Published with the assistance of the French Ministry of Culture – National Centre for the Book



Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA



ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4498-1
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4499-8(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.75 on 14 pt Adobe Janson
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound by MPG Books Group, UK



For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.politybooks.com

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# Acknowledgements

My thanks go to my wife, Dr Estelle Blanc, Laure Adler, Lucien Jerphagnon, Claude Lepelley, Thierry Marchaisse, Dr Françoise Mareschal, Hélène Monsacré, Pierre-François Mourier, Olivier Munnich, Jean-Claude Passeron, Jérôme Prieur and Maurice Sartre, for all their references, suggestions, critiques and encouragement.

Damien Veyne, who has passed on from this world, told me something, drawn from his American experiences, which has illuminated this subject for me.

# 1

## CONSTANTINE: THE SAVIOUR OF HUMANITY

One of the decisive events in western and even world history occurred in 312 AD, in the immense Roman Empire. The fourth century of the Common Era had started badly for the Christian Church: between 303 and 311, it had been subjected to one of the worst persecutions in its history, in which thousands had perished. In 311, one of the four emperors who shared the government of the Empire resigned himself to putting an end to the persecution, bitterly noting in his law decreeing tolerance that persecution was pointless, since the many Christians who, in order to save their lives, had abjured their faith had nevertheless not returned to paganism. As a result, there were gaps in the religious fabric of society (a fact that constituted a subject of anxiety for a leader at this time).

In the following year, 312, a most unprecedented event occurred: another of the co-emperors, Constantine, the hero of this great story, converted to Christianity, following a dream in which he was told: 'By this sign, you will conquer.' It is thought that at most 5–10 per cent of the population

of the Empire (possibly seventy million inhabitants in all) were at this time Christians.[1] As J. B. Bury commented,[2] 'It must never be forgotten that Constantine's revolution was perhaps the most audacious act ever committed by an autocrat in disregard and defiance of the vast majority of his subjects.'

## THE BANALITY OF THE EXCEPTIONAL

As we shall see, eighty years on, on a different battlefield by a different river, paganism was to find itself banned and, although spared persecution, knew that it was vanquished. For, throughout the fourth century, the Church, itself no longer persecuted as it had been for the previous three centuries, had been supported in every way by most of the Empire's Caesars, all converts to Christianity. As a result, by the fourth century the Empire was almost wholly populated by Christians and there are one and a half billion Christians in the world today. It is, however, true that, after the 600s, half the Christian regions that had belonged to the Empire became Muslim without any apparent difficulty.

What kind of a man was this Constantine who played such a decisive role? I believe that, far from being a calculating cynic or a person steeped in superstition, as has even recently been claimed, he was a man of great vision. His conversion made it possible for him to take part in what he regarded as a supernatural epic, indeed to direct it himself and thus ensure the salvation of humanity. He felt that, thanks to this salvation, his reign was a religious turning point in which he himself had an enormously important role to play. He had hardly become master of the Roman West (probably at the age of no more than thirty-five), when in 314, he declared in a letter to his 'very dear brothers', the bishops, that 'the eternal and inconceivable holiness of our God will absolutely

not allow the human condition to wander in darkness any longer.'[3]

Constantine was certainly sincere, but that is to put it mildly. For this was an altogether exceptional man. Historians tend to be less accustomed to coping with the exceptional than with the safe method of 'setting things in ordered series'. Moreover, they have an acute sense of the banal, the 'everyday,' that is not possessed by the many intellectuals who either believe in political miracles or, on the contrary, as Flaubert put it, 'denigrate the age in which they live out of historical ignorance'. Constantine considered himself to have been chosen, destined by a divine decree to play a providential role in the thousand-year-old system of salvation. That is what he said and also what he wrote in an authentic text that we shall be considering later but that is so extravagant that most historians are too embarrassed to mention it.

There is nevertheless nothing unbelievable about Constantine's excessive claims. They too can be arranged in an orderly series, for cases do arise in which potentates, thinkers or religious or political leaders believe themselves called to save the human race and revolutionize the course of the world. To doubt their sincerity would be a grave mistake, for it is all the more credible given that, in Rome, the role of an emperor was sometimes interpreted far more liberally than that of our own kings. In those distant times, it was not students who were inspired to action by the power of their imagination, but the potentate himself. However, Constantine, an imaginative, even megalomaniac, potentate, was also a man of action, steeped in prudence as much as in energy.[4] So he achieved his aims: the Roman throne became Christian and the Church became a power to reckon with. Without Constantine, Christianity would have remained simply an avant-garde sect.

## A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE FACTS

But let us start by getting a brief account of the events out of the way. Constantine's conversion was but one episode in the course of one of those monotonous struggles between generals bent solely on possession of the throne, struggles that take up a good half of Roman political history. At the beginning of the fourth century, the Roman Empire was divided between four co-emperors who were expected to reign in fraternal concord. Two of them shared the rich Roman East (Greece, Turkey, Syria, Egypt and so on), while the vast West (which included the Danube regions and the Maghreb desert) was divided between a certain Licinius (about whom there will be more to say) and our hero, Constantine, who, for his part, governed Gaul, England and Spain.

By rights he should also have governed Italy, but a fifth, thieving, player, by the name of Maxentius, had become involved. He had usurped the power in Rome and Italy as a whole. Later, the Christians there, with a view to praising Constantine, falsely claimed that Maxentius had remained a persecutor. It was in order to recapture Italy from Maxentius that Constantine declared war on him and it was during the campaign that ensued that he became a convert, placing his trust in the god of the Christians in order to emerge victorious. His conversion was sealed by a dream in which, during the night before the battle, the god of the Christians promised him victory, provided he would make his new religion public.

And the next day, the memorable 28 October 312, on the outskirts of Rome and on the banks of the river Tiber, God did indeed procure him the famous victory of the Milvian Bridge. Maxentius was crushed and killed by Constantine's troops, who promoted the personal religion of the leader whom they served[5]: their shields[6] displayed an entirely new

symbol[7] that had been revealed to the emperor as he slept,[8] a symbol that he himself then sported on his own helmet.[9] This was what was to become known as the 'Christogram', constructed from the first two letters of Christ's name, the Greek X and P, the one superimposed upon the other and the two interlocked.

On the following day, 29 October, Constantine, at the head of his troops, made his solemn entry to Rome by way of the Via Lata, the present-day Corso. The date, 29 October 312 (rather than that of the so-called 'edict of Milan' of 313) marks the switch from ancient paganism to the Christian era.[10] Let there be no mistake about this: the historic role of Constantine was not to put an end to persecutions (for those had ceased two years earlier, when Christianity obtained the freedom from persecution that paganism enjoyed). Rather, it was to make Christianity, now his own faith, the religion that was favoured in every way over paganism.

## A SUMMARY OF CONSTANTINE'S ACTIONS

In the rest of the Empire, in the following year, 313, Licinius, who had remained a pagan but was not a persecutor, overcame the persecuting co-emperor who reigned over the East. Licinius, too, had had a dream. On the eve of the battle, an 'angel' had promised him victory provided he prayed to a certain 'supreme god' and got his army likewise to pray to this deity.[11] Sure enough, he was victorious and thus became the master of the East, where he issued an edict of tolerance, thereby delivering the eastern Christians from their persecutor. The two co-emperors, the pagan Licinius and the Christian Constantine, now reigned together over an indivisible empire. They had reached agreement, in Milan, to treat their pagan and Christian subjects on an equal footing. This was a compromise, a concession that ran contrary to all their

principles, but it was indispensable in an age that now set out to be at peace (*pro quiete temporis*).[12]

After the victory at the Milvian Bridge, the pagans may have assumed that Constantine's attitude to the god who had procured him victory would be similar to that of his predecessors. Augustus, following his victory over Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, had, as we know, settled his debt to Apollo by consecrating a sanctuary and a local cult to the god. The Christogram that appeared on the shields of Constantine's army indicated that victory had been won thanks to the god of the Christians. However, what was not understood was that the relationship between this god and his creatures was a permanent, passionate and mutual one, whereas the relationship between the human race and the race of pagan gods, who were primarily concerned about themselves, was, so to speak, international,[13] contractual and spasmodic. Apollo had not instigated his relationship with Augustus and had never instructed the latter to sweep to victory under his divine sign.

Nothing could have been more different from, on the one hand, the relationship between the pagans and their gods and, on the other, that between the Christians and their God: a pagan was content with his gods if he had elicited their help by means of his prayers and vows; a Christian instead endeavoured to make his God content with him. Augustus did not serve Apollo; he simply turned to him for help; nor would his distant pagan successors be the servants of the Invincible Sun, their protector and celestial image. In contrast, throughout the twenty-five years that followed, Constantine repeatedly declared that he was simply the servant of Christ, who had admitted him to his service and would always procure him victory.

What Constantine had seen in his dream were the very initials of the name of Christ; Licinius, on the other hand,

had simply heeded the 'supreme god' of an anonymous and 'catch-all' monotheism upon whom all enlightened minds of the period could reach agreement. With that victory of 312, the religious 'discourse' of the authority in power had changed radically. Constantine nevertheless did not nor ever would try to impose his new faith upon his subjects. No more did his successors. Even less did he regard Christianity as an 'ideology' to be inculcated in his subjects for political purposes. (We shall be returning, in conclusion, to this seemingly profound explanation that leaps spontaneously to the minds of many historians.)

Ten years later, in 324, the Christian religion at one stroke took on a 'global' dimension and Constantine acquired the historical stature that he would thereafter retain. For in the East Constantine had recently crushed Licinius, who was claimed to be a persecutor, and had re-established the unity of the Roman Empire under his sole authority, bringing together its two halves under his own Christian sceptre. Christianity now took over this vast empire that constituted the centre of the world and considered itself to be synonymous with civilization itself. This was the beginning of what was for many long centuries to be known as the Christian Empire or even Christendom. Constantine hastened to reassure his new subjects by reversing the terms of 312 and promising them that the pagans in the East would be treated on the same footing as Christians: they were free stupidly to remain pagans and 'keep, if they wish, their sanctuaries of falsehood',[14] so the latter were not to be destroyed. Times had changed: in 312, the religion that was tolerated was Christianity; now, in 324, it was paganism.[15]

As early as the first year after his 312 victory, the religious policy of the emperor had been made clear and it was not to change; we shall be studying it in detail throughout this little book.

1 In the part of the Empire of which he had become the master and which he had liberated from persecution, all, 'literally all',[16] the major decisions that he took from the winter of 312–13 onward were designed to prepare a Christian future for the Roman world.
2 However, Constantine was too prudent and too pragmatic to venture further. He, personally, was a Christian, but he was to be the sovereign of an empire that had integrated the Church while remaining officially pagan. The emperor persecuted neither the pagan cults nor the large pagan majority of his subjects. He limited himself to repeatedly declaring, in his official documents, that paganism was a despicable superstition.
3 As Christianity was the sovereign's own personal faith, he set up the Church on a strong basis, as if by an imperial whim of a ruler known as 'the lion'. A Caesar was less bound by dynastic tradition and the 'fundamental laws of the realm' than our own, later kings (which is why so many 'mad Caesars' famously came to power). Nevertheless, he never imposed his own religion upon others.
4 Except, that is, on one point: since he himself was a Christian, he would not tolerate paganism in any domain that affected him in person, such as the cult of emperors. Likewise, in solidarity with his fellow Christians, he dispensed the latter from duties involving pagan rites associated with their public functions.
5 Despite his deep desire to see all his subjects become Christians, he never committed himself to the impossible task of converting them. He never persecuted the pagans or denied them the right to express themselves; nor did he disadvantage them in their careers: if superstitious people wished to damn themselves, they were free to do so. Neither did Constantine's successors exert any

pressure on them, but left the matter of their conversion to the Church, whose methods involved persuasion rather than persecution.

6 In Constantine's eyes, the most pressing need was not to convert the pagans, but to abolish the nefarious animal sacrifices to those demons, the false gods. He spoke of doing so at some point but did not himself have the nerve, and so left the task to the pious son who succeeded him.

7 Furthermore, faced with 'his brothers, the bishops', this lay-benefactor and champion of the Christian faith modestly, but without hesitation, assumed the unprecedented, unclassifiable and self-proclaimed function of a kind of president of the Church.[17] He involved himself in ecclesiastical affairs, concentrating on opposing, not pagans, but bad Christians, separatists and heretics.

## A QUIETLY PERVASIVE TOLERANCE

Convert the pagans? That would have constituted a vast endeavour. Constantine realized that their resistance (*epanastasis*) was so strong that he gave up the idea of forcing the Truth upon them and, despite all his hopes, remained tolerant. Following his two great victories in 312 and 324, he was at pains to reassure the pagans living in the provinces that he had just acquired: 'Let those in error . . . gladly receive the benefit of peace and quiet . . . May none molest another; may each retain what his soul desires, and practise it.'[18] And he kept his promises: the pagan cults were not abolished until half a century after his death; and not until two centuries later did Justinian start trying to convert the last of the pagans, along with the Jews.

Such was 'Constantine's pragmatism'[19]; and there was one great advantage to it. By forbearing to convert the pagans

forcibly, Constantine avoided incurring hostility both against himself and against Christianity (the future of which was, in truth, far less assured than is generally believed, for – as we shall see – in 364 it was almost wiped out). Alongside the partisan elite constituted by the Christian sect, the pagan masses were left to live on in their ignorance, indifferent to the whims of their emperor. The only group to suffer was a small circle of educated pagans.

As we have seen, Constantine left the pagans and their cults in peace even after 324, when the reunification of the East and the West, under his sceptre, rendered him all-powerful. In that year, he issued proclamations first to his new eastern subjects, then to all the inhabitants of his Empire.[20] These proclamations, written in a personal rather than an official style, were penned by a convinced Christian who rated paganism lower than earth itself and declared that Christianity was the only good religion, as was proved by the prince's victories engineered by the one true God. However, he took no measures at all against paganism. Constantine himself was never a persecutor and under his rule the Empire lived in peace. Better still, he formally forbade anyone to turn against his neighbours for religious reasons: it was essential that public tranquillity should reign. No doubt his edicts were directed at overzealous Christians who were eager to attack the pagan ceremonies and temples.

The ambiguous nature of the role of a Roman emperor was enough to drive one mad (as, indeed, it had three centuries before Constantine, when Tiberius, the first successor of the founder of the imperial regime, sank into paranoia). A Caesar needed to master four languages: that of a leader whose civil power was of a military nature and who therefore issued orders; that of a superior being (albeit not a living god), who was the subject of a personality cult; that of a member of the Great Imperial Council, the Senate, in which he was simply

the first among his peers (who still, however, feared for their heads under his rule); and that of the Empire's first magistrate, who was in constant communication with his fellow citizens and was answerable to them. In his decrees and proclamations of 324, Constantine chose to use this fourth language, intermingling it with a fifth, that of a fervent Christian who acted as a propagandist for his faith and reckoned paganism to be a 'disadvantageous superstition', in contrast to Christianity, which constituted the divine and 'most holy Law'.[21]

Despite everything, he kept his promises of religious tolerance and civil peace, which was affected by no bloody movements of persecution. The only conflicts to assail him were the quarrels that erupted between different Christian groups. He did not force anyone to convert[22]; he appointed pagans to the very highest of state offices,[23] he never legislated against the pagan cults (even after his 324 triumphs, despite what is sometimes claimed)[24] and he allowed the Roman Senate to continue to fund the official priests and public cults of the Roman state; these continued as before and did so until almost the end of the century.

Is the word tolerance really the right one to use? At the risk of being pointlessly didactic, perhaps a number of distinctions need to be made. One might be tolerant through agnosticism or because one reckoned that a number of different paths might all lead to the almost inaccessible Truth.[25] One might become tolerant through a compromise, either being weary of religious wars or because persecution had proved unsuccessful. Or one might, as the French do, hold that the religions of the state's citizens are none of its business, for religion is a private matter for individuals, or, again, as the Americans hold, that states should neither recognize, prohibit nor favour any type of religious confession. Constantine, for his part, believed in a single Truth and felt that he had the right and the duty to impose it.[26] Nevertheless, he did not risk

taking action and left in peace those whom he considered to be mistaken, claiming that he did so in the interests of public tranquillity: in other words because he would have come up against strong opposition. In consequence, his empire remained at once Christian and pagan.

But Constantine also insisted that there should be one particular domain reserved in his favour. Given that Christianity was his own personal religion (and was, under his successors, to become for all practical purposes that of the throne), he could not allow his own person to be defiled by the pagan cult.[27] In 315, he went to Rome to celebrate the tenth anniversary of his rule. These anniversary celebrations were patriotic, marking ten years of the happiest of reigns. They involved performing sacrifices to honour the vows and prayers of ten years earlier for the prosperity of the Roman sovereign, followed by further sacrifices designed to renew the contract for a further ten happy years. Constantine allowed the people to rejoice amid great celebrations, but he banned all animal sacrifices,[28] thereby (as Alföldi put it) disinfecting the pagan rites.

To cut a long story short, let us consider just one particular famous document that testifies to this disinfected paganism and this same pious horror of blood sacrifices. The city of Spello, in Umbria, asked Constantine to authorize the establishment of a great annual festival, the pretext for which would be the cult of emperors. It even proposed to build a temple for the dead, deified emperors of the reigning dynasty (to which Constantine's own father belonged).[29] Like all festivals in honour of the cult of emperors, it would feature gladiator fights, the greatest of entertainments, seldom on offer, extremely costly and of a purely secular nature.

Constantine gave his permission for the festival, the gladiator fights (which he had always hesitated to ban, since they were so very popular), the dynastic temple and the imperial

priest; but he forbade the latter to inflict the defilement of sacrifices upon his dynasty. This was to be an imperial cult without the bloodshed of victims. Since an imperial priest, through his function, depended immediately upon the emperor himself, Constantine made the most of this personal link that justified his ban on this pagan rite. For it was only in the (admittedly extensive) sphere that surrounded his own person that he prohibited paganism and favoured Christianity. As we have noted above, it was in just the same manner that he had had the Christogram painted on the shields of his soldiers, for the army was the personal instrument of the emperor, its direct leader.

Out of solidarity with his co-believers, he took care to spare them, like himself, any impure contact with the blood of sacrificial victims. Christian magistrates were thus dispensed from performing the rites that went with their function as magistrates, such as the lustrations that led up to a sacrifice. The law prescribed a beating or a fine for anyone who forced Christian municipal councillors to comply with such 'superstition'.[30] Double or even treble advantages stemmed from this law: wealthy Christians lost their excuse for avoiding heavy municipal duties[31] and unscrupulous Christians were encouraged to behave more in conformity with their faith.

Constantine also spared Christians, even criminal ones, from a legal obligation to sin. Some offenders found to be guilty were customarily sentenced to fight as gladiators; and given that God's Law rules that 'thou shalt not kill', gladiators had always been banned from the Church. Constantine decided that the penalty of fighting as a gladiator would henceforth be replaced by that of forced labour in the mines or quarries, 'so that those condemned should pay for their crimes without shedding blood.' The great emperor's successors were to observe the same law.[32]

We should note that anyone condemned to death, to

forced labour or to the gladiators' arena automatically became the property of the imperial Exchequer[33] and therefore of the emperor himself. So, in this instance too, Constantine was observing his principle of imposing his own religion only within his own personal sphere. By virtue of that same principle, his son Constantius was to forbid high-ranking pagan magistrates who continued to lay on spectacles in the gladiators' arena to engage as gladiators either soldiers (since the army belonged to the prince in person) or officers of the imperial palace.[34]

All in all, Constantine did more or less respect his pragmatic principle of tolerance. However, in one instance at least, in 314, it did happen that he 'forgot' to celebrate the extremely solemn Centennial Games which, once every 110 years, occasioned several days and nights of pagan ceremonies and sacrifices designed to celebrate[35] the legendary date of the foundation of Rome. Furthermore, he introduced a number of very cunning measures, such as decreeing that Sunday be a day of rest (a matter to which we shall be returning). As we shall see, he also introduced a law totally abolishing all pagan sacrifices, but this was never applied. It was only under Constantine's successor that the pagan religion began to suffer.

Constantine's way of introducing an imbalance between the two religions was not so much to attack paganism but rather to favour the Christians. He made it clear to all his subjects that their sovereign was a Christian, in his official declarations he denigrated paganism as a base superstition and he bestowed traditional imperial favours upon the Christian religion (ordering the construction of many churches, but no temples). The fact was that, although paganism continued to be a *religio licita* and Constantine, like any emperor, was its Great Pontiff, in all domains he acted as the protector of the Christians alone.

It was thanks to him that the slow but total Christianization of the Empire began. The Church, formerly a prohibited 'sect', now became more than a licit one: it was part of the state and was eventually to supplant paganism as the standard religion. For its first three centuries, Christianity had remained a sect (in the by no means pejorative sense that German sociologists apply this term), that is to say a group that individuals choose to join and a collection of beliefs to which some become converted, as opposed to a 'church', a collection of beliefs into which one is born and that are held by all. In 197, Tertullian[36] wrote, 'Christians are made, not born.' This slow transition from sect to the customary religion was brought about by providing the population with a clerical framework, which became possible because the Church was protected and also because Christianity was the religion that the government itself, publicly expressing its scorn for paganism, adopted.

Thus, around 400, Christians could feel that they would soon triumph totally: 'The authority, which the Christian faith hath, is diffused all the world over.'[37] But what was the source of the new religion's power over people's minds? Its spiritual superiority over paganism was blindingly clear, as we shall see, but this could be appreciated only by a religious elite. Besides, why was it that the emperor himself had converted?

At the time of Constantine's birth, Christianity was 'the burning issue of the age'[38]: whoever possessed the slightest religious or philosophical sensitivity was concerned with it and many of the literate elite had already become converts. I must therefore, albeit with considerable trepidation, try to sketch in a picture of Christianity in the years between 200 and 300 in order to determine the diverse factors that made conversion a tempting option. Hélène Monsacré tells me that the motive for Constantine's conversion is clear: if he wanted

to be a great emperor, he needed a great God. A gigantic, caring God who passionately desired the wellbeing of the human race aroused far stronger sentiments than the crowd of pagan gods who lived for themselves. And this Christian God revealed a no less gigantic plan for the eternal salvation of humanity. He involved himself in the lives of the faithful, demanding that they observe a strict moral code.