

## Christianity and the Politics of Imperial Rome

Fourth Century and After

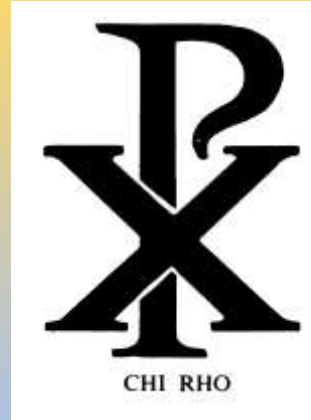
### Introduction

- This lesson focuses on the intersection of Christianity and politics immediately following its legalization.
- The conversion of Constantine (274-337) is the single most historically significant conversion to Christianity other than the Apostle Paul.
  - It defined what Christianity would look like in Western societies until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
  - The same is true of some Eastern societies too.
- After Constantine, the relationship between church and state continued to morph until Christianity was Rome's official religion.
- Even then, how state and church related to each other differed from East to West.



## Constantine's Conversion

- Constantine was a tremendous force and factor of change for the church – all previous emperors persecuted the church.
  - His life dates are from 274-337. He claimed to be a Christian.
  - His mother Helena was a Christian. His father Constantius was a pagan who tolerated Christians.
  - Although he was illegitimately born, Constantine inherited many characteristics from his parents (toleration of Christianity).
  - He learned to be a talented general and able politician.
- In 312, he defeated Maxientus for control of the Western half of the empire at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.
  - He told Eusebius that he had a vision the night before of a “chi” and “rho” imposed on each other. He took it to be a sign from the Christian God. He heard a voice say, “In this sign, you will conquer.”
  - He put the symbol on the soldier's shields and after winning the battle, he adopted Christianity.



## Constantine

- Constantine was a political genius.
- Even before he conquered his enemies, he strategically planned for it.
  - When he was in control of Gaul and Britania, he provided protection from the Barbarians, but taxed the people high, but not so high to lose their loyalty.
  - Once he had the whole of the West, he then slowly started making plans for getting the East.
  - He placated Licinius with marriage to his sister, but simultaneously planned for war. Yet, he did things in such a way that he didn't look like the aggressor.
  - Through a series of wars, Constantine won, and he promised to spare his rival if he abdicated. Licinius agreed, but was then still murdered later on charges of conspiracy.
- Some believe this kind of political shrewdness calls his Christian faith into question. More on that later.



## Constantine

- It is important to recognize that Constantine simply legalized and privileged Christianity. He did not make the Roman Empire Christian.
  - Paganism was still legal too. Most people were still pagans. He had to be the emperor for both Christians and pagans.
- He desired to restore the grandeur of the Roman Empire, but he thought it could only be achieved on the basis of Christianity rather than paganism. So he had to reshape the Empire.
  - The old aristocracy in Rome (e.g., Senate) opposed Constantine's privileging of Christianity. So he decided it would be best if he built a new Rome in the East.
- Byzantium was enlarged into Constantinople. It would be big enough for multitudes. Two magnificent churches were built, and no pagan temples were allowed to be built. Also no gladiatorial arenas were allowed.
  - But Pagans were invited to take part in the planning of the city.
  - The most famous statue of Apollo was moved from Egypt to Constantinople and transformed into a huge monument—though Constantine removed its head and placed a sculpture of his own head upon it.
- During the building, many luxury items were taken from the rest of the Empire. Incentives were offered to get people to move there (military and tax exemption; free oil and wheat).
- By moving east, this left the West vulnerable, and it is no accident the barbarians will eventually overrun it.

## Constantine's Faith

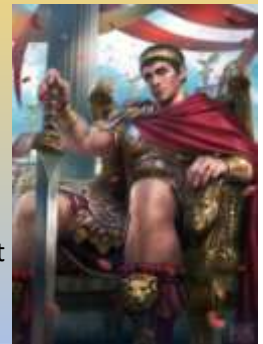
- The idea that Constantine was not a sincere believer is debated, especially because of distinctly unchristian behavior late in his life.
  - For example, he executed people for political reasons (e.g., father-in-law, three brother-in-laws, and his wife).
  - He even executed his own son Crispus after his wife accused him of attempted sexual assault—he didn't even hear his son's side.
  - Some early Christian writers say he repented of the execution of his son.
- He did increasingly side with Arianism in his later years, but remember this was a time where this was still being worked out, and some orthodox believers opposed others who held the deity of Christ.
  - Furthermore, there was confusion on what was meant by certain words.
- Constantine was a complicated individual. He legalized and favored Christianity, yet he never put himself under the church. He saw himself as the bishop of bishops.
- He took part in pagan rituals, and the church never challenged him on it since he wasn't baptized. He wasn't technically a Christian yet.
  - So they saw him as one friendly to the faith, but not fully of it. Such a person could receive the advice and support of the church, but not its direction.
- He did not become baptized until his final hour.

## Constantine's Faith

- He regularly attended Christian worship services, listened to long sermons without complaint, observed Easter with reverence, publicly gave speeches against paganism and idolatry while praising Christianity as the true faith.
- When his audience would clap and cheer him, he would redirect their praise by pointing up to heaven.
- When he conquered Rome, he did not thank the gods like Roman generals normally did, but gave credit to the Christian God.
- He made Sunday the day of worship and rest for Christians. He constructed church buildings at his own expense.
  - He gifted to the bishop of Rome the ancient palace of the Laterani family, which is now the Lateran Palace of the popes.
- He made Christian bishops part of the imperial legal structure in a civil law disputes.
- He passed welfare laws for poor to discourage the practice of killing unwanted children at birth.
- He forbid crucifixion and tried to end gladiatorial combat (having success in some places but not others).
- Though Paganism was still legal, he passed laws outlawing witchcraft and private sacrifices.
- Constantine truly believed that he owed his position as emperor to the Christian God. So he believed he must advance the cause of that God to keep the blessings coming.

## Constantine's Faith

- Evidentially speaking, it is difficult to argue that he identified with Christianity for political expediency.
- It would have gained him no benefit.
  - Christians were the poorest of the society—so no economic benefit.
  - Christians were still a minority—there were far more pagans.
  - In fact, the ruling classes of the Empire were entirely pagan. The Army was obsessed with Mithraism, a competitor to Christianity.
- As he waged war to get control of Rome at the battle of the Milvian bridge, his target was a pagan city with deeply committed pagan aristocracy.
  - In other words, Rome would have wanted him to lose if he claimed Christ, yet he nevertheless fought that battle in the name of Christ. That would work against him, not for him.
- Constantine likely believed the Christian God was real and powerful. He believed all of his victories were from this God.
  - So he enacted laws in favor of Christianity and built churches for them. He was not seeking their goodwill, but the goodwill of their God.



## Constantine's Faith

- He appears to be a sincere man, but his understanding of the Christian message was novice at best.
  - This is why he still served pagan gods too.
- His father followed Sol Invictus. Constantine likely thought they were the same God.
  - He apparently kept the title of pontifex maximus and partook in pagan ceremonies without thinking that he was betraying or abandoning the God that gave him victory or power.
- At this point in time, an emperor could not undo paganism.
  - Paganism was the majority everywhere—in the government, the army, the philosophical academies, etc.
  - He had to be Emperor for the whole society.
- So early in his reign, you find coins that have both the names of the gods as well as the symbol of Christ on them.



## Constantine's Faith

- As the years progressed, his faith developed as well.
- He increasingly left behind the ancient pagan religion as he gained a better understanding of Christian doctrine.
  - After he defeated Licinius, he gave an edict in 324 that all soldiers worship God on Sunday. But then again, Sol Invictus was worshiped that day too, so the pagans did not resist.
- But he did start appointing Christians to government against the will of the pagan senate in Rome.
- Yet, that pagan senate still declared him a god after his death, attempting to place him in the pagan continuity. His sons did not object.





# Constantine's Impact

- It goes without saying that Constantine was a complicated man and ruler. But his impact cannot be underestimated.
- First, persecution ceased.
- Second, imperial theology flourished as some—e.g., Eusebius of Caesarea—argued that Constantine was used by God to bring the church and empire together as the goal of history.
- Third, as the church's favored status caused many to flock to the church, it grew in worldliness, and so monasticism was the answer of those who saw all this as a bad thing.
  - Also, martyrdom was now nearly impossible, so the elevated level of Christianity was now monasticism.
- Fourth, the church was now in a position to hammer out statements and positions of orthodoxy on Trinitarianism and Christology.
  - Constantine thought he had the authority to intervene by summoning councils.
  - This is indicative of Caesaropapism (Emperor's authority over the church).



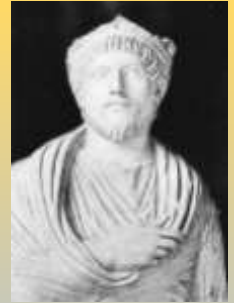
# Constantine's Impact

- Fifth, Christian worship ceased to be simple and was now influenced by imperial protocol.
  - Ornate and large buildings; burning of incense; expensive garments for the clergy; beginning services with a processional (used to be part of honoring the emperors); having a choir; riches and pomp came to be seen as signs of divine favor.
- Due to Constantine's mom Helena claiming to discover relics with power in Jerusalem, a popular folk version of Christianity was hard to resist.
  - Elevation of the saints and relics was discussed in a previous lecture.
  - Preachers preached against it often, but to no avail.
- Constantine's sons will cause the drift away from paganism to be far stronger.
  - Constantius, his son, took a much stronger stance against paganism. In 356, he ordered all pagan temples to be shut down.



## Julian the Apostate

- At the time of Constantine's death, Constantius had many relatives murdered in addition to Constantine's sons from a different mother.
  - Julian and his brother were the sons of one of those half-brothers, but they too young to be threats, so they were spared. They were cousins to the new emperor.
- Both were raised Christian. Julian's brother was eventually given a political position, but then Constantius later killed him for conspiracy.
- As a young man, Julian rejected Christianity. He studied pagan philosophy extensively.
- Eventually, he was appointed to govern Gaul, which he did excellently. He defeated barbarians.
  - Constantius saw him as a threat, but the legions under Julian declared him the leader. Before a civil war could happen, Constantius died.
  - In 361, Julian was now the emperor.



## Julian the Apostate

- Administratively, he was very competent.
  - But he is remembered as the apostate because he tried to restore paganism to the empire. Though paganism was not persecuted under Constantine and his sons, it fell out of favor. The temples were empty and the priests impoverished.
- Julian created a pagan hierarchy modeled off the church hierarchy and tried to restore it.
  - Most of his subjects mocked the pagan rituals, even as they participated in them. So he took a more hostile approach to the church.
  - Christians were fired from government. They were forbidden from teaching classic literature.
- He ridiculed Christians, calling them *Galileans* and wrote a polemic against Christianity.
- He knew the Bible fairly well and mocked its content and teachings.
  - He started having the Temple rebuilt in Jerusalem to hurt the Christian claim that its destruction fulfilled OT prophecy.
- Had Julian lived long, he may have succeeded since the efforts of Constantine and his sons were still relatively new.
  - But he died in 363 in war against the Persians, and legend says his last words were, "Thou has conquered, Galilean."

## Christianity's Victory Over Rome

- Julian was the last Roman emperor not to profess the Christian faith. Under his successors, it became far more dominant.
- By 380, Theodosius I (379-395) passed anti-Pagan edicts and effectually made Christianity the official religion of the empire.
  - The only non-Christian group that the law tolerated were the Jews.
- The relationship between church and state would shift during Theodosius' reign. In the West, there will be a move away from Caesaropapism.
  - However, the argument goes back to even the reign of Constantius.



## Church and State

- When Constantius was emperor, he embraced Arianism and persecuted Trinitarians.
- Athanasius declared him to be an antichrist.
  - He argued that emperors should have no authority over internal Church matters.
- Constantius ordered bishop Hosius of Cordova to accept Arians at the Lord's table in 355, to which the bishop defied him and quoted Matthew 22:21.
  - He articulated a separation of church and state, where he claimed the church cannot exercise earthly rule and the government cannot exercise spiritual authority over the church.
- This view became widespread in the Western part of the Empire. This position was tested against Theodosius by the bishop of Milan, Ambrose (339-397).



## Ambrose of Milan 339-397

- Ambrose was at first a provisional governor in Milan, not a bishop.
- The bishop, Auxentius, was an Arian, and when he died in 374, Ambrose used his political power to keep order and peace during the election of a new bishop.
  - He exhorted the church to peaceful conduct. A child shouted, "Ambrose for bishop," and he was elected.
  - He hadn't even been baptized yet. He was not first a priest. This was unprecedented. He was horrified and tried to escape the call at first. He reluctantly accepted.
- He eventually achieved fame as one of the greatest bishops of his time. Augustine was his student.
- He introduced antiphonal singing in the Western churches. He wrote hymns still sung today. Many of them were meant to teach against Arianism.
  - The writing of hymns was a development for certain, since prior to this they only sang Psalms.



## Church and State

- Theodosius became friends with Ambrose, but two times this relationship was tested. They represented a showdown between church and state.
- First, in 388, Christians in Callinicum were ordered by Theodosius to rebuild a synagogue they burned down. He told them to use church funds.
  - Ambrose challenged him, arguing that church money could not be used to build a place for non-Christian worship.
  - He actually preached a sermon against Theodosius as the emperor sat among the congregation. He even refused him communion! Theodosius gave in.
- Second, in 390, a rioting mob in Thessalonica murdered the virtuous and beloved governor of the province. Theodosius ordered soldiers to massacre the Thessalonians, but then he sent a second order to tell them to hold off; it was too late. The Thessalonian troops wanted to avenge their governor, and so they killed 7,000 people.
  - Ambrose excommunicated the emperor over this until he saw meaningful repentance. Theodosius showed up claiming repentance, but Ambrose said there had to be public penance.
  - The emperor agreed, but was still banned from attending worship for 8 months. The first time he was allowed back, he had to kneel before God asking for forgiveness before the whole congregation.
  - The emperor complied. Ambrose justified his position in these controversies by appealing to David and Nathan.

## Conclusion

- The fourth century began with the largest persecution of the church in history, and it ended with Christianity as the official religion of the Empire.
  - The relationship between church and state became increasingly complex. In the East, Constantine's Caesaropapism remained the norm.
  - In the West, Ambrose's separation of church and state prevailed—though his victories over Theodosius would eventually give way to theocracy in the West where the church rules the state.
- The events of the 4<sup>th</sup> century paved the way for the future development of the Western papacy.
  - The rise of monasticism will play a big role.
  - The government abandoning the West in favor of the East will lead to the political fall of the Western Empire. Rome's Bishop will take a leading political and ecclesiastical role.
  - The ecumenical councils also enhanced the Bishop of Rome's prestige.