

WHEN OUR WORLD BECAME CHRISTIAN

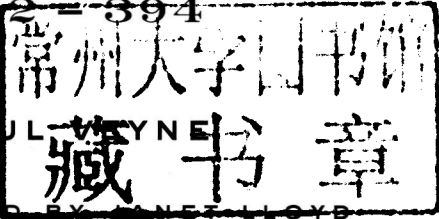
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PAUL VEYNE

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TRANSLATED BY CONET LOYD

polity

First published in French as *Quand notre monde est devenu chrétien*
© Editions Albin Michel D.A. – Paris 2007

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

This English edition © Polity Press, 2010

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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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

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For Lucien Jerphagnon, and in memory of Claude Roy

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.

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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 served⁵: their shields⁶ displayed an entirely new

symbol⁷ 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