

'Uncharted Paths'

- Politics, power, tensions and truth (300-460 CE)

CONSTANTINE AND CHRISTENDOM ¹

Constantine and power

When in 311 Galarius declared an amnesty for Christians within the Roman Empire the church had won the most remarkable victory in the face of terrible persecutions. The rising star in the political firmament was the vigorous ruler, Constantine. The fact that he increasingly favoured the church in his attitudes and edicts would appear to bode well for Christians; however, the events of his reign were to affect the church in negative ways from which she has never yet fully recovered.²

Constantine was born in 280 in Nis in the Balkans, the son of the emperor Constantius Chlorus.³ His father's mentor, Diocletian, had brought the young Constantine to Nicomedia in the east to groom him for future office. In 306 he travelled to visit his sick father who was in Britain. At his death, that July in York, the Roman troops hailed Constantine as Emperor and began a march towards Italy. By 310 he controlled all the territory his father had once ruled, and by the spring of 312 he was ready to attack Rome. He met Maxentius, one of the challengers for power in the west, at Milvian Bridge, some five miles north of the capital and defeated him on the 28th October, and took control of the city and the Roman Empire in the west. In 313 he met his eastern rival, Licinius⁴, in Milan, where a benevolent policy towards the Christians and religious tolerance towards all others across the empire was agreed (called the 'edict of Milan'). The two men ruled side by side for ten years, and then there was a dramatic change. Then Licinius began to persecute Christians and loose his grip on power. A joint attack against barbarians crossing the Danube led to Constantine attacking and defeating Licinius. So in 324 Constantine ruled supreme. Constantine decided to stay in the east and to mark and consolidate the new era by building a new capital city. He chose a fresh site at the small ancient town of Byzantium on the Bosphorus, where east touches west; ideal for communication and protection. Following a solemn consecration of the site in 330, this 'new Rome', named Constantinople ('Constantine's town') was built. He adorned its public places with artistic splendours looted from pagan cities. Moving capital cities was to have important

¹ In all the disputes and schisms among Christians that lie ahead in our story, it is tempting to dismiss them as nothing to do with us and to take sides against them. It is what other Christians did. What we must remember is that there is only *one* church to which all Christians belong; whether Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant or other group. We share in our failures and successes.

² For a contemporary discussion as to the historical and continuing impact of Christendom on church and society and the challenge to faith with its collapse in western society see Stuart Murray '**Post-Christendom**' Paternoster 2004

³ As stated above (p 12), in 284 Diocletian had divided imperial responsibilities between himself (in the East) and Maximian (in the West), in 293 each appointed a deputy, Galerius (East) and Constantius (West). In 305 Diocletian and Maximian both abdicated leaving control, east and west, in the hands of their respective Caesars.

⁴ Licinius was the Caesar who had obtained the amnesty for Christians from Galarius which brought an end to the great persecution' in 311; he believed, like Constantine, that favouring Christians would help to strengthen the crumbling empire.



consequences for the empire. Its centre of gravity shifted east and the emperors became less interested in the west. The capital attracted the attention of Christians whose language and culture was Greek, stretching the already existing tensions between themselves and the Latin speaking Christians of the west. Here were many of the seeds for the future division of the church, east and west, Greek and Latin, Orthodox and Catholic.

Constantine and Christianity

It has been popular to present Constantine as a hero of the Christian church, but for many reasons this needs to be questioned. His mother Helena was a Christian, and the earliest records suggest that he was something of a 'solar syncretist'; a kind of monotheism focused on the imagery of the sun. He was obviously influenced and impressed by the Christian church and saw it as means of strengthening the empire. Before the battle of Milvian Bridge (312) he was said to have had a vision of the 'Chi-Ro' symbol and heard the words, "Conquer in this". He claimed his subsequent victory was due to Christ; his friend and church historian Eusebius was adamant that this was his conversion experience. While he was to legislate in favour of Christians he himself was not baptised till on his deathbed (337)⁵. At first he did not distinguish between God the Father and the divine sun, he kept the pagan priestly title *Pontifex Maximus*, and he kept pagan imagery on his coinage. As a man he perpetrated many evils, even executing his father-in-law, three brothers-in-law, a son and his wife. The excuse that he was merely a person of his times simply isn't adequate. The question as to the depth of Constantine's personal Christian commitment simply cannot be answered, but all the evidence suggests it was shallow. Nevertheless he was to make a major impact in the way that he used his office to influence and intervene in the matters of the church.

Constantine began by favouring the church while placating the pagans, but as his reign progressed he repressed the zeal of pagans and raised the status of Christians:

- Christians did not have to attend pagan feasts;
- Black magic forbidden while white magic allowed;
- Christian clergy enjoyed the same status as pagan priests;
- Freeing slaves could take place in church or temple;
- Church could receive legacies as pagan organisations could;
- Sunday (day of the sun) was given the same status as pagan feasts;
- Christians could accept the office of magistrate;
- Part of the corn tax was given to the church;
- Bishops could act as judges if both parties agreed;
- Tax on celibacy was abolished;
- Jews were forbidden to persecute converts to Christianity;
- Slaves were no longer to be crucified;
- Many savage legal punishments were abolished;
- Children were not to be exposed or sold at birth.

⁵ We know that the debate over whether or not post-baptismal sin could be forgiven led to some people delaying baptism to the last moment.



As indicated above, Constantine did not simply favour the church in his legislation and giving them fine buildings (Lat: *basilicas*) and palaces for religious use; he also directly involved himself in its authority. During his reign the Church went through a traumatic period of theological dispute, as we shall see, and to be fair the protagonists invited him to intervene. The Roman emperor had always been head of the state religion, responsible for maintaining relationship between the people and their gods; so why not a Christian emperor, especially when the stability of the empire was at stake? This unique development; the link between Church and State, the influence of politics on faith is going to have incalculable consequences into the future.

At Constantine's death in 337 his Empire was divided between his three sons, but by 353 it was re-united under one of them called Constantius. He took an even harder line against paganism, though it still played an important part in the life of the peasant population. In 361 there was a new emperor in Julian, a nephew of Constantine whose troubled youth had led him to hold on to paganism under a veneer of Christianity. Once in power he promoted a revival in paganism and was given the nickname 'the Apostate'.

The successors of Julian were all Christian, but it was under Theodosius in 380 that the state was formally declared Christian:

- The state supported the orthodox faith;
- Heretics were persecuted as much as pagans;
- All pagan practices and customs were prohibited;
- Temples were destroyed or turned into churches.

These laws were not rigidly enforced and pagan worship continued openly for some time and secretly for generations; but the death-knell had sounded. Equally disturbing was the action taken against heretics. Priscillian, bishop of Avila, was accused of heretical belief and immoral practices. The ecclesiastical court handed him and six followers to the emperor who had them executed at Trier. There was strong protest at both the sentence and the civil authorities involvement by some⁶. How quickly everything has changed, what ominous signs of that which is to come.

Donatists and schism

When Constantine came to power the church in North Africa was experiencing growing internal conflict in the aftermath of the recent persecution. There were strong feelings about: -

- 'Confessors' - those who had suffered in prison;
- 'Traditors' - those who had handed over scriptures to the authorities.

The bishop of Carthage was accused of being a 'traditor'. He was also censured for criticising local Christians for giving too much adulation to 'confessors', some of whom he believed had encouraged the police to imprison them so that the memory of their sordid pasts might be forgotten. This naturally infuriated many. At his death his archdeacon Caecilian, who shared his opinions, succeeded him as bishop. Anger increased not only because of his attitude, but because other presbyters had hoped for the position, and

⁶ By Ambrose of Milan and Martin of Tours for example.



because he was consecrated before many other surrounding bishops could be present, and because the person who actually consecrated him was also accused of being a 'trahitor'. It all created an explosive situation. Those who opposed Caecilian held a meeting with seventy bishops and consecrated a man called Majorinus as a rival bishop of Carthage.

The parties appealed to Constantine and a request to be heard by neutral bishops from Gaul. There would be five investigations in all between 313-320 all of which found against the schismatic 'Donatists'; called by that name because a man called Donatus bishop of Casae Nigrae led the defence of their position. The issues were much more significant than whether the person who consecrated Caecilian was a 'trahitor'; they were fundamental principles about the validity of the sacraments and the nature of the church:

- Does the unworthiness of a minister invalidate what they do?
- Does a sinful minister destroy the value of the sacraments?
- Are only good people to be members of the church?
- Is the church for saints only or a school for sinners?

Constantine appeared indifferent to the questions but patient in trying to get agreement. Even though many eminent leaders attended the investigations no solution was found, and all the decisions condemned the Donatists. Constantine ordered their churches to be confiscated, and threatened their leaders with death and then exile.

The history of the Donatist movement reveals social issues in the church apart from the theological ones:

- Poorer peasants supported Donatism against the landowners;
- Indigenous Berbers supported Donatism against the Romans.

Because the movement drew on social conflicts it eventually led to violence. Following the death of Constantine bands of wandering Donatists tried to redress their felt wrongs by force. Armed with clubs they called 'Israels' they terrorised the respectable classes. The emperor's interventions were met with the retort, "What has the emperor to do with the church?" By 348 repressions had led to troublemakers being driven out or silenced but not won. During the reign of Julian (361) there was a Donatist revival, and strong by the time Augustine became bishop of Hippo (396). He tried persuasion, but worn down by their violence preached 'good coercion' and finally repression by the authorities, quoting Luke 14:23, 'Compel them to come in'⁷. In 411 they were again condemned and places of worship legally forbidden. This was the beginning of the end for Donatism; under the Vandals they were broken, by 590 there were few remaining, the Muslim invasions obliterated them. Whatever the rights or wrongs of the events, the issues raised by the Donatist schism demand careful reflection as they are still a challenge to the church.

⁷ These words of Augustine will be quoted throughout the Middle Ages to justify using violence against heretics. Including: Origen-Irenaeus?; Athanasius / Arius; Basil / Capadocians; John Chrysostom; Nestorius / Cyril; Leo the Great etc – big questions, east-west tensions (Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria) etc.

NICAEA TO CHALCEDON

A golden age

The one hundred and twenty six years that fall between the council of Nicaea (325) and the council of Chalcedon (451) have been described as a 'golden age' of Christian writing and thought. Among the most creative writers of the time were those of the Greek speaking church in the east.

Athanasius (296-373)

As Constantine found himself the sole ruler of the Empire (324) he was confronted with a separate theological dispute to Donatism in North Africa. This time it was dividing the churches in the east, but was destined to threaten the Christian community throughout the Empire and beyond. Arius was a presbyter at the church of Baucalis, in the suburbs of Alexandria in Egypt. He was a tall, slightly round-shouldered, learned cleric who was known for his piety, though a favourite with the religious ladies in the congregation. He fell out with his own bishop Alexander by complaining that he, and others, did not differentiate sufficiently between Father and Son. He went on to insist that because the Son was 'begotten' he must be a created being, "There was a time when the Son was not"⁸. The debate among the eastern churches became so heated that Constantine intervened and summoned a synod at Nicaea, which was to prove to be one of the most important Christian gatherings ever held.

The council of Nicaea (325) was held in a city in Turkey not far from Constantinople. There were some 300 bishops present, but only four or five from churches in the west. Constantine presided over the proceedings personally, though he was not yet baptised and so not yet a member of the church! After discussing the charges against Arius they searched for a formula that would express orthodox truth. The final creed was probably a conflation of a number of baptismal creeds, especially those from Antioch and Jerusalem:

- Christ the son is of the being (Gk *ousia*) of the Father;
- He is 'begotten' and 'not made';
- He is 'one substance' (Gk *homoousios*) with the Father;
- He 'became flesh' and was made human.

Most bishops signed the creed, two did not, who along with Arius and his friends were to be anathematised and banished. However, the Arian controversy was only just beginning and would rage for a further 56 years, being finally settled at the council of Constantinople in 381.

The next 35 years were dominated by the personality of Athanasius. A small man with a keen mind, Egyptian by birth and Greek by education, proved to be one of the great moulders and defenders of Christian thought. Yet he was wily, brutal and unscrupulous, a skilled theologian with a journalistic style of writing and a single minded commitment to Nicaea. He took no official part, but as secretary to Alexander bishop of Alexandria he had an important influence. When Alexander died in 328 he became bishop by popular demand though only 33 years old.

⁸ See Workshop notes 'Credible or Incredible: The Godhead' p 23-30



Following Nicaea, Arianism became even more popular in the east, and in 337 Constantine's son Constantius was very favourable towards it. Athanasius was the focus of their attacks. Over a period of seventeen years he faced five exiles, hiding either in the desert or shielded by common people in the city. Exiled in Rome in 339 his links with the western church found support for his cause. It has been said of him that: -

'... by his tenacity and vision in preaching one God and saviour, he preserved from dissolution the unity and integrity of the Christian faith'⁹.

Basil of Caesarea [329-379]

Basil was the first of three theologians who became known as the 'Cappadocian Fathers', from Cappadocia in Asia Minor-Turkey (the other two were Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, see below). They each had a profound influence on the character of Christian theology. They gave final shape to the Greek doctrine of the Godhead and through their efforts Arianism was finally defeated.

Basil of Caesarea was the eldest son of Christian parents (St. Emelia and St Basil the Elder). His grandparents on his mother's side were persecuted under Diocletian and had to survive for years in hiding in the forests of Pontus. They became disciples of Gregory the Wonderworker (who himself was a disciple of Origin). Basil completed his studies in Athens where he was a friend of the future emperor Julian. Returning home to teach rhetoric his pride was challenged when his sister Macrina insisted that spiritual values were more important than worldly success. He determined to devote himself to a life of asceticism and devotion. Baptised in 357 he visited monastic settlements in Palestine, Syria and Egypt and then retired to a hermitage near his home. In 364 he became a presbyter, and in 370 became bishop of Caesarea. With a forceful dignity he defied both the Arians and the emperor in their attempt impose their doctrines. He died at fifty, made prematurely old by self-inflicted privations. Basil made contributions in three main areas: -

- **As an ascetic:** introducing monasticism throughout Pontus and innovating the idea of 'koinobios', living in community into Asia Minor¹⁰;
- **As a bishop:** leadership in church affairs and meeting the social needs of people with a hospital and hostels for the poor;
- **As a teacher:** his towering personality and popularity enabled him to uphold Nicaean doctrine, and mediate between east and west resolving conflict over terminology. He was the first Christian to write a book about the divinity of the Holy Spirit. In the Eastern Church he is called 'St Basil the Great'.

Gregory of Nyssa (330-395)

Gregory was the younger brother of Basil; a shy, gentle studious man who was totally dominated by his forceful brother whom he sometimes called 'the Master'. Having been a teacher and monastic, in 371 reluctantly accepted his brother's invitation to become bishop of Nyssa. He struggled with Arianism to his own hurt but became increasingly popular and sought after and gave the inaugural address at the council of Constantinople. Little is known of his later years as he appears to have travelled extensively. He was probably a more gifted original and intellectual thinker than his brother, but did not have his practical

⁹ GL Prestige quoted in JD Douglas (Ed) '*New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*' Paternoster, 1974; 81

¹⁰ see reference to his monasticism on page 12



ability. Such was his fame that he was referred to as 'father of fathers'. He held universalist convictions and believed that all would be saved in the end.

Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389)

Gregory was the son of the bishop of Nazianzum and close friend of Basil. Initially he was a teacher but spent most of his time helping his father, he spent time in Basil's monastic retreat. At the council of Constantinople (381) he defended the Nicæan faith, and his preaching in the city did much to establish the orthodox faith. Though elected bishop he characteristically stepped down when it was disputed. While his personal presence was unimpressive Gregory had outstanding powers of oratory. He was a poet and wrote extensively on the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the one Godhead. In the Orthodox Church he is called 'St Gregory the Theologian' an honour shared by only two others in the Eastern church (the Apostle John and Symeon the New Theologian).

John Chrysostom (347-407)

John came from Antioch where he had been a monk in the desert until ill health forced him to return to the city. He as an eloquent preacher and keen ascetic he upset the easy-going fashionable church of his day. In 397 his eloquence and piety led him to be appointed bishop of Constantinople, where he was given the nickname *Chrysostom* (Gk: 'golden mouthed'). Some people disliked him because he tightened church discipline and expelled disreputable clergy.

Greater tension mounted when the 'tall brothers', four outstandingly tall men leading a group of fifty others, arrived in Constantinople. They were escaping an ecclesiastical persecution in Egypt instigated by the Roman scholar Jerome who was on a witch-hunt against Origen's teaching, supported by Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria. John was impressed by the men and interceded for them. Alexandria had always been jealous of the favour bishops of Constantinople had been shown by various emperors so Theophilus saw the dispute as an opportunity to gain controlling influence in the capital. He came to Constantinople, ignored John, stirred up dissent against him, even using troops to attempt to break up church services, and then held a synod that deposed him. The empress Eudoxia disliked John and supported the decision and so he was exiled. Popular pressure brought about his return. However, a sermon attacking Eudoxia's vanities, 'Again Herodias raves; again she dances; again she demands the head of John on a platter'. She flew into a rage, and again he was exiled (404), with a violent deportation to the Black Sea en route to which he died of ill treatment. It is worth remembering his life long saying, "Glory be to God for all things". It is important to notice the extent to which the eastern church was under the power of the emperor and the State.

In the west, with the exception of Augustine, the thinking of the Latin speaking Christians tended to be less original than those in the east, from whom they borrowed a great deal. Nonetheless, their contributions were important.

Four Ecumenical Councils that cover this period are:

▪ **325 – Council of Nicaea**

- Condemnation of Arianism
- Nicæan Creed formulated
- Three great centres declared: *Rome, Alexandria, Antioch* (*Jerusalem* next in honour but subject to the Metropolitan of Caesarea)



▪ 381 – Council of Constantinople

- Expanded and adapted the Creed to affirm the Spirit as God
- Condemnation of Apollinarianism
- Constantinople assigned second place after Rome (resented by Rome and Alexandria). The basis for Constantinople's new position of authority was that it was 'New Rome'. 'Old Rome' disliked the implications. The patriarchate of Rome believed that its spiritual authority derived from the authority of Peter not the political significance of the city; the very beginnings of disharmony between Constantinople (East) and Rome (West). Also the beginnings of disharmony between Alexandria and Constantinople, which would flare up in the Nestorian controversy.

▪ 431 – Council of Ephesus

- Condemnation of Nestorianism (theology swings in an Alexandrian direction)
- 'Theotokos' upheld
- Church of Cyprus gains independence from Antioch and has remained self-governing ever since.
- The Nestorians who could not accept the decisions of the Council sought refuge in the Persian Church and became the Church of the East (also called the Assyrian or Chaldean Church).

▪ 451 – Council of Chalcedon

- Condemnation of Nestorians *and* Monophysites (theology swings in an Antiochian direction)
- 'Two natures in one Person'
- Reaffirmed Constantinople's supremacy over Alexandria. Jerusalem freed from Caesarea. Pentarchy complete.
- Those Christians that could not accept the decisions of the Council (or saw it as an example of Constantinople dominating the indigenous Christianity of Alexandria and Antioch) became known as the Oriental Orthodox Churches and included the Syrians, Copts, Ethiopians and Armenians.

"Ephesus and Chalcedon were a rock of Orthodoxy,
but they were also a great rock of offence."¹¹

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¹¹ K Ware *'The Orthodox Church'* Penguin 1997, 28



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