

The Triumph of Christianity: Religion as an Instrument of Control*

Robert L. Cleve

During the past few centuries, an enormous amount of scholarly effort and energy has been devoted to the question, “Why and how did Christianity triumph over seemingly insurmountable opposition, to become, in the end, the only religion which was permitted to exist within the Roman Empire, and afterward its successor states?” After all the analysis and debate, only four proposals to explain this extraordinary historical phenomenon seem to have merit:¹ 1) the “appeal” of Christianity’s promise of salvation; 2) its “rational” theology; 3) the strong organization of the church hierarchy; and 4) the support and coercion of the government.

But do all four of these reasons have equal validity? It is important to examine each of them. Many scholars give a great deal of credit for Christianity’s success to something they call “appeal.” Christianity, they say, had more appeal to the masses than did any of the other salvationist religions. During the first three centuries of our era, there existed, of course, numerous so-called “mystery” cults, which offered salvation in the form of life beyond the grave. All of these cults, including Christianity, had at least one thing in common: they sought, through mystical rituals and behavior, to associate the believer with a *soter*, a hero or “savior,” who had conquered death by having died and then returned to the realm of the living. The argument of “appeal” seems to assume that some form of salvationist religion was bound to replace paganism—that is, classical humanism—and it seeks only to explain why it was Christianity and not one of the others which won the day. That assumption is, to my mind, debatable.² However, even if we accept this premise, this explanation for the success of Christianity is not a strong one.

Put into its simplest and crudest form, this argument proposes that Christianity was more appealing and thus acquired a larger number of converts than competing religions because it was the “right” religion, whereas the other religions were the “wrong” ones.³ Of course scholars put this arguments into much more sophisticated clothing. They say, for example, that Christianity was superior to the other mystery cults because its founder was a historical person; because it had higher moral standards; because it incorporated from the Jews their rich tradition of religion, law, and literature; because it promised the meek that they would inherit the earth—although, of course, it must be left in the hands of the powerful and the arrogant for the foreseeable future

Furthermore, say these scholars, all other mystic cults had fatal disadvantages when compared to Christianity. Some of them, like the cult of Mithras, appealed only to men; others, like the cult of Isis, appealed mostly to women; and still other cults, like that of Cybele, required unrealistic sacrifices or changes in way of life. The priests of Cybele, for instance, castrated themselves as part of their initiation into the priesthood—quite a drastic change in lifestyle, to say the least!

But upon close examination, this whole argument of “appeal” appears to be the product of narrow, ethnocentric thinking. As a matter of fact, up until the year 313, when the emperor Constantine made Christianity the “favored” religion of the Roman Empire, there is little evidence that Christianity was more popular with the general population than the other salvationist cults. Of course Christianity seems emotionally more appealing

to us today than any of its early competitors, about which we actually know very little except what the Christian writers, who were their enemies, have told us.

The truth is, many important aspects of these cults were, in one form or another, absorbed into the Christian religion.⁴ The example as already mentioned above, the priests of Cybele worked themselves into an emotional frenzy during their initiation into the priesthood and then castrated themselves, which seems strange to us and even a bit amusing. But what about the promise of celibacy taken by Roman Catholic priests as an important part of their initiation into the priesthood? Is this not a symbolic form of self-castration? Where did it originate? It is certainly not part of Christianity's Jewish heritage. In Judaism a religious leader is expected to be a family man, not celibate.

In fact, when one analyzes Christian customs and practices, one discovers nothing original in any one of them.⁵ Almost every individual facet of Christian belief or practice can be found in one or another (usually many) of the mystery religions, or in pagan practices far older than Christianity. An obvious example is the Christmas holiday. No one really has the slightest idea on what day Jesus was born. The celebration of his birthday on December 25th is purely the result of the successful takeover of the very popular pagan festival called the Feast of *Sol Invictus*, which was celebrated on that date, together with many aspects of the Festival of the Saturnalia, which was originally celebrated on December 17, but which during the late empire lasted seven days from December 17 to 21.⁶ The exchange of presents, the feasting with family and friends on special foods, the decorating of a Christmas tree, and many other Christmas customs are practices taken over from the pagans at one time or another during the history of Christianity. These parallels with earlier religious practices can be found throughout Christianity. Like the other great world religions, such as Islam and Buddhism, Christianity was not based on new concepts so much as on a unique reinterpretation, or recombination, of older beliefs and practices. What made Christianity different from the pagan religions was the impact that the life of the religious leader, Jesus, had upon his followers. And Christianity also shares this feature with Islam and Buddhism. These broad similarities with competing religions are, in my judgment, a telling argument against the proposition that Christianity was successful because it was more appealing, more attractive (in other words, more popular), than the other salvationist cults. In fact, the evidence being discussed here could be used to make a rational argument that Christianity had less intrinsic appeal than the pagan religions and thus was forced to absorb many elements and images from them in order to overcome this basic lack of appeal.

Of course Christianity is extremely appealing to those individuals who have already made a commitment to it, as the large store of surviving writings of the early Christian apologists attest in ample measure.⁷ But this does not prove that Christianity was especially appealing to the non-Christians of the period, as the writings of the opponents of early Christianity also attest. In fact, hardly any element of this argument will stand up under close objective examination. For example, the proponents of the "appeal" theory for Christianity's success often say that large numbers of converts were brought into the church because of their fear of hell. However, the fear of eternal punishment is rarely, if ever, present in those who do not already ascribe to the basic tenets of Christianity or some other salvationist religion which shares this belief. In reality then, this fear of

punishment could not have made much more of an impression on ancient pagans than it makes on modern pagans. At any rate, Christianity's "appeal" cannot be seriously considered as a major factor in its success.⁸

The next two reasons usually given by scholars for the triumph of Christianity can be treated much more briefly. Writers who contend that Christianity's so-called "rational" theology brought it success in the marketplace of ideas, so to speak, overlook the fact that this rationalization of Christian theology is itself an intrusion of pagan humanism into the mysticism of early Christianity, produced by Christianity's efforts to compete with paganism on its own terms. Actually, the most important and fundamental aspects of Christian theology—and this is true with any religion—are not rational at all and must be accepted on faith alone. No one has ever discovered a new religion through scientific research. The development of the "rational" framework for the irrational principles of Christianity took place over a period of many centuries, and indeed is still in the process of development today; that is the function of theologians. The rationalization of Christian theology was really a reaction to, or a compromise with, Greek culture. When early Christianity came into contact with the Greeks, they naturally began to analyze Christian beliefs by utilizing the rational principles of their own philosophy. In defense, the church fathers began to employ these same rational modes of thought to explain and expound their own doctrine.⁹ Therefore, this so-called rational theology was, in the final analysis, a compromise between Christian mysticism and Greek philosophic humanism rather than a triumph of Christian rationalism over pagan superstition, and it is not an argument for the strength and popularity of Christianity itself, especially among the masses of "common" people for whom philosophy holds little attraction, anyway?

The relationship between Christianity on Greek culture was very much a two-way street: each changed the other in fundamental ways through cultural interpenetration. At any rate, rationalism as a reason for the triumph of Christianity among the masses does not seem to me to be persuasive. How often does the rational argument carry the day in matters of religion anyway? Early Christians, as well as modern ones, realized this and in fact very little stress was ever placed on the rational aspects of Christianity when seeking new converts. Besides, what percentage of the population of the empire during the third and fourth centuries was educated and literate enough to participate in this kind of rational debate concerning religion? Thus the rationalism of Christianity cannot be an important factor in its triumph over paganism.

However, the third reason on the list, Christianity's superior organization, does seem to have some merit. If the rational framework for its theology is the Greek contribution to Christianity, the organizational and administrative techniques of the church were certainly the major contributions of the Romans. During the first three or four centuries of its existence, the church organized itself on the model of the Roman Empire. It developed a hierarchy of deacons, priests, and bishops, in imitation of the imperial organization of procurators, legates, and proconsuls. In fact, the church became a kind of state itself, a state within the state. All of this was made possible, of course, by the umbrella of the *Pax Romana*, which allowed the free movement of people and ideas throughout the Mediterranean basin and did not normally interfere in purely local affairs.

There is no need here to go into the details of the church hierarchy and bureaucracy,¹⁰ but it cannot be denied that its complex organization gave the church the strength,

resilience, and endurance that allowed it not only to survive some very serious defeats and setbacks, which might otherwise have destroyed it, but also enabled it to take quick and tenacious advantage of its victories. Yet I cannot accept the proposition that this strong church organization could in itself account for Christianity's ultimate and total triumph over paganism; it could only assure its survival as a minority religion. Something more was necessary.

And so, finally, we come to the fourth reason on the list: government support and coercion, which, in my judgment, is the single most important reason for the triumph of Christianity. Left to their own inclinations, it is inconceivable that the entire population of a complex, heterogeneous civilization would ever willingly and spontaneously adopt a single religion, especially one fundamentally at odds with the values of the vast majority of its members, any more than they would all march out and join a single political party of their own volition. The individualistic nature of human beings is simply too diverse. Such an event requires coercion; it requires some form of political and social force. This fundamental fact is usually ignored by both historians and theologians.

In the year 313, when Constantine made Christianity the "favored" religion of the Roman Empire, it has been estimated that anywhere from three to seven percent of the population was Christian—and this was after almost three centuries of intense missionary effort by the Christians.¹¹ The overwhelming majority of the people were still very much anti-Christian and were, in fact, still willing to enthusiastically participate in persecution, because Christians were still perceived by the pagans to be a threat to society in general and to pagan values and the pagan way of life. I cannot accept the proposition that Christianity in the early fourth century had become so irresistibly popular that it forced the emperor of the Roman Empire to adopt it as the most-favored religion of the state. Although no convincing evidence to support this thesis has ever been put forward, most historians have accepted this position without question. But in reality, it is extremely improbable that Christianity, or any other of the salvationist religions for that matter, would ever have become the universal faith of the Roman Empire without active government support and coercion.

But on the other hand, five percent of the population is not an insignificant figure when it comes to gaining control of the government and perpetrating a cultural and political revolution. In our own era, the Bolsheviks, for example, seized control of the Russian government and brought about a fundamental cultural, political, and economic revolution in that society, even though less than three percent of the population were members of that group. If you accept the premise—and almost all historians do—that an individual can influence history, then it follows that even a small group of very dedicated and highly organized individuals can have an infinitely stronger influence. And if that small group gains control of the power structure of society, as the Christians did after 313, or as the communists did in 1917, its influence upon the direction of history can be decisive. In such a situation, the "will of the majority" becomes almost irrelevant.

Throughout its subsequent history, Christianity has managed to spread, with rare exceptions, only by first converting the rulers of nations, after which the conversion of the people was a simple matter. In no case have Christian missionary efforts been successful until the ruling class accepted Christianity (or was replaced by another ruling class which was already Christian) and exerted support and coercion to the conversion of the masses.

Therefore, I believe that the Christian revolution was engineered from above, not from below, as the early Christian writers and many modern scholars would have us believe.¹²

But if my contention is true, what were Constantine's motives?¹³ Why would he embrace an obscure religion that was practiced by less than seven percent of the population, a religion, moreover, that was despised and held in contempt by the vast majority of the people and that seemed and that seemed determined to dismantle the very culture and even the state he was trying to rule? What did Constantine possibly have to gain from such a move ?

Of course, the answer of the Christian writers, such as Eusebius, was that Constantine underwent a religious conversion, which caused him to become the champion of the Christian religion: that his actions were the "will of God." Some writers have even claimed that this event is simply another piece of evidence that God controls human destiny and the direction of history. It is all a divine plan. To many historians this is a valid view of history, but since I cannot speak for God, I must leave the discussion of these arguments to others.

However, there are rational, historical reasons which explain this important event. Remember that Constantine faced a very serious political problem: how to unite under his sole rule an empire that had become very divided and disorganized. The reasons that he chose Christianity to aid him in this effort are not really so mysterious if viewed in this context. After all, monotheism seemed much more compatible with the kind of absolute monarchy that Constantine was trying to establish than did polytheism: one supreme, all-powerful god in heaven; one supreme, all-powerful emperor on earth, acting as God's viceroy. In the world of the Mediterranean and the Near East, the political and social structure here on earth had always been perceived as a kind of reflection of the more perfect reality of heaven. The ancient Mesopotamians and Egyptians had believed this; Plato had believed it; and certainly the Christians believed that the community of men here on earth should at least attempt to pattern its structure and its life as nearly as possible after the greater reality of heaven.

Furthermore, it was obvious to most people in the fourth century, and certainly to Constantine, that the old façade of republican forms created by Augustus, which had supported the imperial rule for over three hundred years and had been modeled on an ideal in which the state was ruled by a group of men, just as heaven was ruled by a group of gods, had now all but disappeared and no longer held the imagination and loyalty of the empire's inhabitants. A new ideology, a new rationale, a new image was now required to support the monarchy, and Constantine saw in the new religion of Christianity, perhaps unconsciously, the potential for establishing that new rationale.

Also, it should be recognized that paganism was not a united, monolithic religion. Pagan cults were bound together only loosely by their devotion to "the gods." Pagans had no common organization, no common system of theology, no supreme cause to unite them into an organic form. The church, on the other hand, claimed at least to be unified; it demanded the total and exclusive allegiance of all its members. Its leaders exercised total control over the life and behavior of their "flock." If this unity, organization, and control could be placed in the service of the state, it could be a powerful instrument for the support of an authoritarian ruler of the type that envisioned. Christianity, in fact, had the potential to provide totalitarian control over both the public and the private lives of the

empire's inhabitants. And the Church stood ready to give the ruler control of this power in exchange for support and protection. Thus, at this point the goals and ideals of Constantine (and indeed the ruling class) and the Church meshed together very closely.

Constantine also had powerful economic motives for embracing Christianity. By making it the favored religion of the state and placing himself at its head he would the right, indeed he would now have a divine mission to destroy the pagan religion. This, in turn, gave him and his supporters the opportunity to pilfer and pillage the pagan temples and shrines which contained the treasures built up over many centuries. As early as 314, Constantine wrote to the Synod of Arles: "The inconceivable goodness of our God forbids that mankind should continue to wander in the dark."¹⁴ Nothing can make a religious conversion as ardent and sincere as the passion of self-interest. In short, he conceived of Christianity as a political and religious instrument (they were both the same in the context of the ancient world) by which he could unite the diverse elements of the empire under the rule of one all-powerful emperor.

History has proven that Constantine was correct in this evaluation of the nature of Christianity. While his policy of using the new religion to support his throne did not hold the entire empire together indefinitely, the eastern half of the Roman Empire, which modern historians call the Byzantine Empire, continued to exist and often to prosper under Christian emperors until 1453, a period of over one thousand years. Christianity remained the firm ally of authoritarian monarchy everywhere until very recent times. Some would say that it still exhibits evidence that it would again champion authoritarian rule if given an opportunity.

Notes

1. Edward Gibbon, in his famous chapter 15 of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (published in 1776–88), was the first writer to analyze the problem of Christianity's triumph in a historical context—in contrast to a religious event—and he proposed five major reasons for its success: the zeal of the early Christians in spreading the faith; the promise of immortality; the claims of miraculous powers; the ethical standards of early Christianity; and the organization of the church on the model of imperial Rome. Merivale, *Conversion of the Roman Empire* (London, 1865 viii), gave four reasons: the credibility of Christian prophecy and miracles in the eyes of the ancients; the "purity" of the lives of the early Christians; the heroic deaths of the martyrs; and the "temporal success" which Constantine gave the church. The next generation of scholars was much more vague and less analytical in its assessment of the reasons for the triumph of Christianity. W. E. H. Leaky, *History of European Morals* (New York, 1873) 388, attributed Christianity's success to "the conformity of its teaching with the spiritual nature of mankind." Ernest Renan, *Marc Aurèle et la fin du monde antique (Histoire des origines du christianisme, vol. 7, Paris, 1881) 561, saw "the new discipline of hope which it introduced into the world" as the chief reason for Christianity's triumph. Salomon Reinach, *Orpheus* (New York, 1909) 108, believed that the new religion's success was due to "the culmination of a long evolution of beliefs," while Alfred Loisy, *Les mystères mavens et le mystère chrétien* (Paris, 1914), emphasized monotheism and the doctrine of the incarnation, although neither writer explains in historical terms exactly why these ideas were so overwhelmingly persuasive to the pagan mind, which was steeped in an*

almost totally different mode of thinking. Other scholars of the early twentieth century were even more vague in their analyses. A. C. McGiffert, "The Influence of Christianity upon the Roman Empire," *Harvard Theological Review* 2 (1909) 43, said that Christianity was triumphant "because it has far more of the elements of power and permanence, combined with a greater number of attractive features, and satisfied a greater variety of views than any other system." A little later, the collective work, *History of Christianity in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Edinburgh, 1929, based on Adolf von Harnack's book, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, published in 1908) 431–3, enumerates five reasons for Christianity's success: its promise of salvation; its lofty moral ideals; its charity toward the unfortunate; the quasi-political organization of the church; and Christian theology, based on both reason and authority, which embraced all the important ancient thoughts and ideals. J. Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul* (New York, 1943) saw the rise of Christianity almost totally in spiritual and intellectual terms. He gave three reasons: the new religion formed in communities of the Jewish Diaspora, which were economically insecure and emotionally unstable; the condition of the Mediterranean basin—that is the political unity of the Roman Empire promoted the spread of the ideals of the Stoics and produced a "hunger" for mystical and sacramental salvation which cultivated the mystery religions; and finally, the "bridge of ideas" and aggressive missionary work of the early Christians, which produced a system of thought different from both Judaism and Hellenism. More recently, Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984), has again looked at this problem. However, like many of the present generation of historians, he seems to share in a kind of crisis of self-confidence. Many historians seem to believe that the human mind is no longer capable of analyzing the past in a valid or useful way. History seems to have become altogether too complicated to decipher. Better to muddle around in the complexities of the past than to attempt to find solutions to specific problems; better to catalog all the missing items, to lament over the paucity of the evidence, to point out with great care and accuracy all that we cannot know, and thereby avoid the true work of the historian, which is analysis, explanation, and understanding. According to MacMullen (p. 102), it is not valid to say that "the church triumphed because of" . . . any one of ten elements or factors. Such statements are unacceptable . . . because, by their excessive clarification, they filter out too much fact." Thus any statement that does not include *all* the facts is invalid and, because, on the face of it, this is impossible, analysis and understanding of the past becomes impossible. Taken to its logical conclusion, then, this means that the study of history is fruitless and unproductive; in effect, we can learn *nothing* about the past because we cannot know *everything* about it. The very attempt at clarification becomes "unacceptable" and the historian had best not attempt to say anything of substance about past events. In spite of this, MacMullen proceeds to enumerate a number of reasons for the conversion of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire (p. 108): "first, the operation of a desire for blessings, least attested; second, and much more often attested, a fear of physical pain—*timor* as Augustine puts it later, *timor* belonging invariably to conversion; third, and most frequent, credence in miracles" and he also (p. 86f) emphasized that much of the work of conversion was accomplished through various types of coercion.

2. Johannes Geffcken, *The Last Days of Greco-Roman Paganism* (Amsterdam, 1978 (1920), volume 8 of *Europe in the Middle Ages, Selected Studies*) vii: "No scholar of

ancient history. . . will now believe the dogma of earlier days, that there is a direct connection between the coming into existence and spread of Christianity on the one hand and the decline of paganism on the other. The exact opposite is the case.” see also Maarten J. Vermaseren, “Paganism’s Death Struggle, Religions in Competition with Christianity,” from *The Crucible of Christianity*, edited by Arnold Toynbee (London, 1969) 235–260.

3. A typical argument runs like this: “Christianity offered a more profound and spiritual message than the mysteries to the theosophic mind of the Orient, the speculative mind of Greece and the legislative mind of Rome,” Samuel Angus, *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity* (New York, 1925) 270. This kind of ethnocentric evaluation of Christianity was self-evident to many historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but although it seems strangely provincial and almost totally void of relevance to most historians today, W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1984) 904, can still state with supreme ethnocentric finality that the reason for Christianity’s success was that “the revelation of divine truth embraced right conduct as well as right worship in a single system of belief.” This means, of course, that hundreds of millions of human beings (indeed a majority of the human race) who do not accept this system of belief are simply wrong and there is no need for further discussion. This of course is a sound religious argument, but it is hardly a convincing historical analysis. It is interesting, however, that in the end, Frend must give Constantine major credit for Christianity’s triumph (p. 905): “Once Constantine became convinced that the Christian God offered him greater success and security than did the immortal gods of Rome the change from paganism to Christianity occurred rapidly and smoothly.” The real reason, then, for Christianity’s success was that it was useful to the emperor.

4. Early Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr (*Dialogus cum Tryphone*, 51; 70; 78; *Apologia*, 1.66), Tertullian (*de Baptismo*, 5; *de Corona*, 15; *de Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 40), Origen (*contra Celsum*, 6.22), Firmicus Maternus (*Liber de Errore Profanorum Religionum*, 18.2) and Jerome (Epistulae, 107.2-3), commented on the similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions. See also Gary Lease, “Mithraism and Christianity: Borrowings and Transformations,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*. 2.23.1309: “[The mystery] religions are invariably characterized by an initiation act and therefore by the recognition that a person had been changed and made different by participation in that cult; by an emphasis upon present and future salvation ordinarily interpreted as immortality or union with the transcendent divinity; by the persuasion that this salvation is the goal of human existence here on earth and is achieved through a celebration of the god’s fate; by the belief that the transcendent divinity has already passed through death and has achieved a triumphant immortality; and finally by the hope that identification with the divinity marks the achievement of salvation.”

5. Arthur Darby Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background* (New York, 1964), 145: “Only a very few ideas concerning the divine have been granted to humanity and the world which preceded us has already thought them long ago, even if in other, different forms.” Or put more simply (*Ecclesiastes*, 1.9), “there is no new thing under the sun.”

6. Walter Woodburn Hyde, "The Origin of Christmas," *Paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire* (London, 1946), 249–256.
7. Arthur Darby Nock, in "Paul and the Magus," *The Beginnings of Christianity*, (eds.) E. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake, volume 5 (1933) 164–187, cites several examples of pagan religious experiences, which he calls "conversions." The experiences resulted from demonstrations of supernatural power, what the Christians referred to as "miracles." A. Beschtauch, "A propos de récentes découvertes épigraphiques dans le pays de Carthage," *Comptes rendus de l'Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1975) 101–118, published a votive stele in which a priest dedicated an offering and affirmed his faith (*fides*) in the god Saturn, after being advised to do so by "visions." Numerous other examples could be cited, which are quite similar to those more frequently cited for the appeal of Christianity. Probably the most elaborately documented case is that of Aelius Aristides, who lived in the second century and was, in addition to being a famous orator, the tutor of Marcus Aurelius. The five books of his *Sacred Teachings*, are a detailed record of the revelations of the god Asclepius. This work demonstrates that the non-Christian religious experience of Aristides was as intense, personal, and relevant as were the religious experiences of even the most renowned of the early Christian writers. See Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984) 4f; E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge, 1965) 39 f; Wilamowitz, "Der Phetor Aristeides," (1925). There is no reason to assume that such religious experiences among the pagans were either less numerous or less "appealing" than those of the Christians. It is true, however, and for obvious reasons, that a much smaller proportion of these pagan testimonies have survived than is the case for Christian writings. This has resulted in a built-in bias of the sources of the ancient world—the sources as we have them today, not as they existed in their original form—and this bias must be overcome by the student of the period if a clear understanding of the history of early Christianity is to be achieved.
8. Ramsay MacMullen, "Two Types of Conversion to Early Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 37 (1983) 174–192.
9. This process has been exhaustively explored by Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Creek Paideia* (New York, 1961) and more recently by Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984) 105f.
10. Adolf von Harnack, *The Constitution and Law of the Church in the First Two Centuries* (London, 1910); W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1984) 398–414
11. A. H. M. Jones, *The Decline of the Ancient World* (London, 1966) 322: "When Constantine was converted to Christianity in 312 Christians were an insignificant minority in the empire; when Phocas died in 610 pagans were an insignificant minority." See also Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1964) 91, 96, and *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London, 1948) 79: "The Christians were a tiny minority of the population, and they belonged for the most part to the classes of the population who were politically and socially of least importance, the middle and lower classes of the towns." Robert M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (New York, 1977) 6–7, using both Christian and pagan sources, concludes that the Christian community at Rome during the reign of Septimius Severus numbered between 1% and 3% of the total population.

However, Grant's treatment of the admittedly sparse and often unreliable figures perhaps errs on the high side. Using his own figures and arguments, the figure of 1% seems overly generous. For another view, see Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981) 191: "Christianity was powerful and respectable long before it acquired an imperial champion." But if this is true, the church was certainly not powerful or respected enough to protect its members from tragic and often devastating persecutions.

12. András Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (Oxford, 1969) 28: "This is no case of a revolution led by a group, hitherto without rights and oppressed, hastening to turn the world upside down. The existence of paganism is not threatened by elements breaking through from below—it is the holder of the armed forces who suddenly sets himself to oust it. His first steps are slow and conciliatory, but his purpose is plain and unambiguous." This interpretation of the event is accurate as far as it goes. There can be no doubt that Constantine played a fundamental and critical role in the destruction of paganism and the triumph of Christianity. However, Alföldi ignores, or at least grossly underestimates, the importance of that "small group," as he calls it, of dedicated and indeed fanatical Christians who zealously implemented the revolutionary program perpetrated by Constantine. It was this small nucleus, or to use the modern term, this "cadre of shock troops," who were only too eager to be used by Constantine for his own purposes, because they thereby realized their own ambition of power and influence. Neither Constantine nor the Christians could have been successful without the other. Alföldi himself says as much later (p. 31): "[Constantine's] endeavours met and harmonized with the aims of the Church." See also Robert M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (New York, 1977) 11, who sees Christianity "not as a proletarian mass movement but as a relatively small cluster of more or less intense groups, largely middle class in origin. At the time when the emperor Constantine turned toward Christianity, the aristocracy was definitely pagan. . . . What made the Roman world Christian is what Eusebius and others said made it Christian: the conversion of Constantine. The triumph of Christianity in a hierarchically organized society necessarily took place from the top down."

13. The personality, the motives, and the moral character of Constantine the Great have been extremely controversial and open to conflicting interpretation from the very beginning of his career right down to the present day. There does not seem to be any real hope that historians will ever be able to solve such problems of subjective judgment and, in any event, the results and effects of Constantine's career are the subject of this paper, not his personality and moral character. However, the attempt to penetrate Constantine's personality and discern his "true" character and motives have produced literally tons of scholarly tomes, learned treatises, and even an occasional sensational expose. To repeat here again the extensive and exhaustive bibliography of this material, which can easily be found elsewhere, would serve no useful purpose. See in particular the bibliography of T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981) 406–442. In modern historical writing, Constantine has occupied the complete spectrum of interpretation from virtuous prince to evil despot. To give but a few examples: Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen* (Basel, 1853), presents him as a calculating politician motivated only by self-serving and non-religious ambition; on the

other extreme, Andreás Alföldi *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (Oxford, 1948), sees in him a man consumed and guided by religious zeal; A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London, 1949), pictured him as a weak and passive personality whose policies were the product of an anonymous oligarchy of court advisors; most recently, Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981) has attempted to produce a balance, or perhaps more accurately a compromise, between these diverse views and to find in Constantine (p. 275) “neither a saint nor a tyrant,” but an emperor “more humane than some of his predecessors, but still capable of ruthlessness and prone to irrational anger.”

14. Quoted by Andreás Alföldi *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (Oxford, 1969) 8.

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