

FACTFILE: GCE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

UNIT AS 4: CONSTANTINE AND THE CHURCH



Constantine and the church

Constantine: life

Constantine was born on 27 February 272/3. He himself claimed to have been born in 280; as he attempted to stress his youthfulness. He was the first recognised Christian Emperor.

His rise to power was extraordinary and helped convince Christian leaders like Eusebius that God favoured his life for the benefit of the church. In 305 Constantine had no power nor fame, but within 20 years he was Emperor.

On 1 May 305 both emperors, Diocletian and Maximian, resigned in respective ceremonies in Nicomedia and Milan. Previously the East was ruled by Diocletian (as Augustus) and his son-in-law Galerius (as Caesar) and the West rules by Maximian (as Augustus) and Constantius (as Caesar).

Both Caesars were promoted to position of Augustus and the two new Caesars were Severus (in West) and Maximinus Daia (in East). Crucially, two key individuals were ignored: Constantine, as son of Constantius, might have expected promotion and similarly Maxentius, as son of Maximian, might have expected promotion. This new political arrangement failed because of political intrigue, army loyalty and personal ambition.

A series of battles were fought over the following years of confusion and power struggle. Each claimant seeking to further their ambition but eventually Constantine emerged in 325 as the sole victor to rule the Empire alone. By any measure, this was a remarkable rise to power but it was also remarkable in that he was converted to Christianity in these years.

Constantius died at (Eburacum) York on 25 July 306 and the local troops hailed his son Constantine as 'Augustus'. On 26 October 306 Severus' troops in Rome abandoned him and supported Maxentius. Constantine married Maximian's daughter, Fausta, and sister of Maxentius and Maximian came out of retirement to support his son. Further complications were added in 308 when Licinius, an army commander in the East, also staked a claim to political authority. With so many individuals leading personally loyal troops, it was certain that conflict and elimination would result.

Severus was killed was killed in 307. Constantine defeated Maximian at Marseilles in 310. Galerius died in 311 after issuing an edict of toleration and asking the Christians to pray for him.

Constantine defeated Maxentius at Milvian Bridge in 312 to become master of the West. Constantine's conversion is closely tied to this battle. There are two versions of why they fought; Maxentius provoked the conflict to avenge his fathers' death at the hands of Constantine and that Constantine initiated the conflict in order to liberate Rome.

Constantine and Licinius agreed peace and toleration at Milan in early 313 and Maximinus Daia died shortly afterwards. Constantine and Licinius were left as the victors but relationships between them deteriorated. In 320 Licinius, not sharing Constantine's sympathy for Christianity, initiated persecution in East. Constantine defeated Licinius at Chrysopolis in 324 to emerge as sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

The conversion of Constantine.

Constantine defeated Maxentius at Milvian Bridge, 5 miles north of Rome, on 26 Oct. 312. Constantine had fewer soldiers (90,000 infantry & 8,000 cavalry) but Maxentius attacked rashly, leaving the security of the Aurelian walls and attacked with the river behind him. Constantine attacked with ferocity and in hasty retreat across the bridge, Maxentius was drowned in the river.

According to the Christian Lactantius, Constantine had a dream on the evening before the battle. He saw a Christian symbol in the sky of two Greek letters, Chi and Rho, superimposed on each other. This was a monogram of the name of Christ and appeared on Constantine's coins after 315.

This symbol is referred to as the labarum by late fourth-century writers. Constantine ordered his troops to mark this symbol on their shields. After the battle, he attributed his victory to the Christian God. He entered Rome in triumph and the Senate declared him senior Augustus.

Whatever we think of the genuineness of his conversion to Christianity, he was undoubtedly perceived by his contemporaries to have become a Christian.

On entering Rome Constantine's first action was to go directly to a statue of himself and add the labarum to it. Eusebius interprets this as a confession of the cross to the Roman people. There is a possibility that it was only an acknowledgement of a new alliance between Constantine and the Christian God.

Eusebius also provides an account of Constantine's conversion which he states was given to him by Constantine himself near the end of his life. For some time Constantine had been contemplating which god to follow. While praying about midday to the Christian God he saw a cross of light in the sky with the words 'By this conquer'. Constantine certainly believed that he had defeated Maximian with the help of God.

The evidence for the genuineness of Constantine's faith is ambiguous.

Constantine regarded himself as a Christian as confirmed by his surviving letters. He exempted clergy from some taxes. He attempted to solve internal divisions caused by Arianism (e.g. Synod at Antioch in 324 and Council of Nicaea in 325). He favoured Christianity among all religions in the Empire though he never made it the official religion of the Empire. He founded a new capital for the Eastern Empire at Byzantium (Constantinople) and

this included two new Churches dedicated to the Apostles and to Peace. He paid for 50 new copies of the Scriptures for Constantinople. His mother, Helena, visited the Holy Land and 'discovered' many holy sites (e.g. churches on site of Christ's birth, death and ascension). In 316 he banned the practice of branding individuals on the face and crucifixion as punishments because humans are created in God's image. From 318 bishops had similar functions to magistrates and ecclesiastical court had equal powers to the secular court. In 321 he passed legislation on Sunday observance and he encouraged people to leave bequests to the church. Finally, in 337, he was baptised by Bishop Eusebius as he lay dying.

However, perhaps Constantine was somewhat confused between Christ and the Sun god (Sol) after his vision of a bright light in the sky on the eve of Milvian Bridge. In 312 medallions were struck crediting the liberation of Rome to the Sun god and he placed statue of the Sun god in the forum bearing his own features. Coins minted during his reign continued to bear pagan names and emblems. In 326 Constantine executed his eldest son, Crispus, who was accused of having sexual relations with his stepmother Fausta. Also in 326 Fausta was killed in her bath, possibly for falsely accusing Crispus to help her own sons in succession. In 330 Constantine was responsible for the murder of his friend and advisor, Sopater, for frustrating the winds and thereby preventing food from arriving at famine stricken Constantinople.

Arguably, all that can be concluded on this topic is that Constantine believed himself to be a Christian and his contemporaries believed him to be a Christian.

Constantine: religious policy

It is a common misconception that Constantine made Christianity the state religion. He did not. He favoured Christianity and certainly adopted a policy of church and state working together for the maintenance, peace and welfare of society. Constantine believed that Christianity could be a uniting and strengthening factor throughout the Empire. However a divided Church required urgent action.

Constantine's influence is best illustrated by the Council of Nicaea in 325. His theological naivety and political astuteness are exhibited in equal measure. Church and State co-operated in a new development in 325: the State paid all travel and running expenses for Nicaea and the bishops provided church authority for a grand future alliance.

Schism could not be tolerated and so the Council addressed conflict issues such as; Donatism, Melitianism, Arianism, the date of Easter and ecclesiastical structures.

NICAEA ISSUES

Arianism was a theological dispute regarding the nature and position of Jesus Christ in relation to God the Father. Constantine did not actually mind which position was adopted but he did insist that the church must agree upon a united position. The resulting Creed of Nicaea, with insistence upon subscription by all present, indicates how fundamentally important church unity was for Constantine.

All schisms were to be healed. The Donatists in North Africa were eventually compelled by state coercion to comply with mainstream theology or face persecution. The Melitian schism was solved by a interesting mechanism: opposing congregations would unite within one generation by accepting the leadership of the longest living bishop in each locality.

The date of Easter was contentious with some Christians following the Jewish Passover calendar and others adopting a first Sunday after Passover date. Egyptian astrologers offered a solution which is followed to this day; Easter falls on the first Sunday after the full moon following the spring equinox. In all of these issues Constantine reveals a desire for unity, a prerequisite for a state church, and the bishops at Nicaea embraced the new model for church-state relations.

Constantine's policy was effectively a marriage of church and state. In the short term his policies were certainly extremely beneficial to the church: persecution stopped and the authority and financial power of the state now supported Christianity. Unsurprisingly, most church leaders welcomed this new era. Not everyone approved, as some Christians chose to opt out of the new arrangement. It is no accident that the monastic movement blossomed at this time, fuelled by individuals who rejected the new church-state relationship as it developed in the large urban centres of the Empire.

In the long term, and with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see that the Constantinian revolution laid the foundation for later European history in which the church eventually emerged as the wealthiest land owner and largely compromised in spiritual vitality due to the contamination of political and financial intrigue.

