

# Emperor Constantine and the Theology of Christianity - 1 (Eirini Artemi)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



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Emperor Constantine and the theology of Christianity

from his autocracy to the second Ecumenical Council

## ABSTRACT

Since his autocracy to his death, Constantine the Great helped the Christianity to be the main religion to all over the empire. This period of time many heresies appeared. They put the unity of Christianity and its teaching in a great danger. Educated people as Arius, Apollinarius, Marcellus, Eunomius and Macedonius tried to explained the nature of God, His actions and His names according to human relationships, their thoughts and their beliefs. The result was a catastrophe, because new heresies were introduced to the Empire. Orthodox Fathers, as Athanasius the Great and Cappadocians Fathers tried to disprove the heresies with success. Upon to these fathers teaching, the First and the Second Ecumenical Councils managed to base their doctrines and to preserve the true teaching and doctrines of Christianity.



## INTRODUCTION

### Constantine the Great and his turning to Christianity

C. Flavius Valerius Constantinus was born at Naissus, Nis in Serbia. He was the son of Constantius Chlorus, who later became Roman Emperor, and St. Helena, a woman of humble extraction but remarkable character and unusual ability[1]. Helena was a daughter of an inn keeper. The date of his birth is not certain, being given between 274 and 288. Constantine I or Saint Constantine, was the Roman Emperor since 306 to 337. Well known for being the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which proclaimed religious tolerance of all religions throughout the empire[2]. Today, some historians support that there was no official Edict but only Licinus' and Constantinus' decisions about the religion[3].

The Edict did not only protect Christians from religious persecution, but all religions, allowing anyone to worship whichever deity they chose. A similar edict had been issued in 311 by Galerius, then senior emperor of the Tetrarchy; Galerius' edict granted Christians the right to practice their religion without causing any troubles « Ut denuo sint Chrsitiani et conventicula sua componant, ita ut ne quid contra disciplinam agant» but did not restore any property to them[4]. On the contrary, the Edict of Milan consisted of many clauses which stated that all confiscated churches would be returned as well as other provisions for previously persecuted Christians[5]. Neither Constantine nor Licinius proclaimed Christianity

as official religion[6].

In 324, after the defeat of Licinius and his death, Constantine's autocracy began. The insight and acumen of his character led him to take two important decisions, which changed the history of the Roman Empire until then. His first decision was the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Byzantine state and the second was the transfer of the capital of the Empire from Rome to a new city. It was built on the site of ancient Byzantium and its name was Constantinople. This city was the new capital of the Empire, New Rome[7].

Since 320 Constantine was constantly supporting Christianity by financial aid and benefits or tax relief to Christian Church. After the recognition of Christianity as *religio licita*, Constantine the Great conferred the civil *audientia episcopalis* on the bishop. Thereby the bishop judged not only in virtue of his spiritual authority but also on the strength of imperial authority[8]. Although, Constantine was defending and supporting the Christian religion, he was baptized Christian before he died. Typically he remained as *Pontifex Maximus* for political reasons and for maintaining peace and harmony in relations between pagans and Christians[9]. Many historians[10] believe that Constantine helped Christianity by political expediency. They argue that the triumph of the victory of Christianity had been already taken place in the East long before the autocracy of Constantine. The conversion of Constantine to Christianity began – according to Eusebius' history[11]- with the vision of Constantine, before the battle against Maxentius, and Constantine's prayer to God of Christians. Eusebius attributed the description to the vision not only to focus on which was the reason for the conversion of Constantine to Christianity, but in order to show that the new emperor had the blessing of the Triune God of Christians. On this perspective, the political theology was founded on.[12].

Constantine brought about many changes in the empire: i) Crucifixion was abolished, ii) infanticide – the killing of unwanted infants- was abolished, iii)the practice of slavery was discouraged and many slaves were set free, iv)the gladiatorial games were suppressed -although they were not yet completely eliminated, v) Christian men were chosen as emperor's advisers, vi) the Church was made tax-exempt, vii) the first day of the week, Sunday, was set aside as a sacred day of worship. Sunday was made an official Roman holiday so that more people could attend church[13].

It is supported that Constantine embraced Christian Church not only for theological reasons but also for political. As a politician he understood the increasing importance of the Christian minority into private and public life. The fact that

Christianity became his religion and his children's shows that Constantine wasn't guided by political motives only. He was guided by religious fervor too.

## Chapter I.

### 1. Arianism's teaching and the Nicene Council

In 320, an enemy for Christian religion appeared. It was the heresy of Arianism. Arianism developed around 320, in Alexandria of Egypt, concerning the person of Christ and is named after Arius of Alexander. It was the greatest of heresies within the early church that developed a significant following. Constantine should have found the solution to this ecclesiastical problem, which as a great problem for the Empire's unity. The reign of Constantine established a precedent for the position of the emperor as having some influence within the religious discussions going on within the Catholic Church of that time and the dispute over Arianism. Constantine himself disliked the risks to societal stability that religious disputes and controversies brought with them, preferring where possible to establish an orthodoxy. The emperor saw it as his duty to ensure that God was properly worshiped in his empire, and that what proper worship consisted would be determined by the Church.

Arius, a priest from Libya, was proved one of the most dangerous enemies of Christianity. Arius rejected the Origenistic theory of one and the same divine essence broadening down, as it were, so as to subsist at different, hierarchically graded levels. Consequently he refused to accept the idea that Logos occupies an intermediate position, in the sense that Logos is a second divine principle perfectly reflecting the transcendent Father and transmitting to the world of creatures the image by which alone the Father can be known and described[14]. On Arius' point of view, it was impossible that there is no other God than Father. The Father alone is God. The Logos or Son, Arius maintained, was a created being - formed out of nothing by the Father before the universe was made. He therefore said that there was a time when the Son had not existed. According to Arius, the Son was the first and greatest of all that God had created; He was closer to God than all others, and the rest of creation related to God through the Son (for instance, God had created everything else through Christ). By developing this arch-heresy, Arius thought he was defending the fundamental truth that there is only one God - monotheism. A belief in the full deity of Christ, he supposed, would mean the Father and Son were two separate Gods, which contradicted the many statements of the Bible about God's oneness. Arius was also unhappy with Origen's idea that there could be 'degrees' or 'grades' of divinity, with the Son being slightly less divine than the Father -this became known after the Nicene Council as semi-Arianism. Arius argued

that since the Father is clearly God, it follows that the Son could not be God – so He must be a created being.

[To Be Continued]

[1] cf C. Herbermann & G.Grupp «Constantine the Great» [...]

[2] cf A. Christophilopoulou, [...]132.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XXXIV, 4.

[5] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, I, 5.2-14. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* XLVIII.

[6] cf P. P. Ioannou, [...].

[7] Hermias Sozomenos Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 3, p. 51: «... God appeared to him (Constantine) by night, and commanded him to seek another spot. Led by hand of God, he arrived at Byzantium in Thrace, beyond Chalcedon in Bithynia, and here he was desired to build his city and to render it worthy of the name of Constantine. In obedience to the words of God, he therefore enlarged the city formerly called Byzantium... He named it New Rome and Constantinople, and constituted it the imperial capital for all...»

[8] «If proceedings were to be taken before the bishop, the agreement of both sides was requisite (see Codex Justinianus 1.4.7 from the year 398 and Codex Theodosianus 1.27.2 from the year 408). By *Novellae* 79 and 83, Emperor Justinian placed the clergy and monks under episcopal jurisdiction in civil affairs. According to *Novella* 86.2, the bishop, upon rejection of the state judge, was to decide the case in conjunction with the rejected judge. This administrative activity of the bishop in civil law as a justice of the peace can be distinguished only with difficulty from his purely ecclesiastical disciplinary function», <http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/cce/id/278/rec/20> (2012)

[9] cf J. Karagiannopoulos, [...]75.

[10] The Burckhardt presents Constantine as a clever and too ambitious emperor, who sacrificed everything to satisfy his thirst for power. (J. Burckhardt, [...] .326. The German theologian Adolph Harnack supports the same, in his book «The diadosis of Christianity during the first three centuries.» (English transl. of J. Moffatt, 1904).

[11] cf V. Vasiliev, [...] footnote. 4, 71. – Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, IX, 9.2. A select library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, edition P. Schaff, H. Wace, 2nd ser., I, 363.

[12] VI. Fidas, [...] 327.

[13] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Constantine's Life*, III, 18,13,25, 28 etc Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 5-.7.

[14] cf H. Cunliffe- Jones & B. Drewery (ed.), [...] 94