

Introduction

In Dan Brown's best-seller *The Da Vinci Code*, the villainous scholar called Teabing refers to 'the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great'.¹ We also find it to be a recurring theme in Muslim publications, such as *Before Nicea*, a recent publication by two Western converts to Islam:

Remember, these same Romans would later preside over the *Council of Nicea*, headed by the Pagan Roman Emperor, Constantine, who was himself considered to be an incarnation and embodiment of the sun god!! The Council of Nicea and other "councils" lead to the "official" and "orthodox" doctrines of which books should be placed into the Bible, the trinity and Jesus' date of birth being fixed to the 25th of December.²

Muslims believe that Jesus actually taught a unitarian doctrine of God and an ethical/soteriological system in keeping with that of Muhammad, but that Christian teaching was later distorted by people such as Paul and that the Council of Nicæa was the vehicle for the ultimate paganising of Christianity, where the canon of Scripture was fixed by excluding supposed unitarian gospels and by institutionalising Trinitarian doctrine. The belief that Constantine was a pagan who enforced this matter through the Council is a central focus of this conspiracy theory. In different ways, we also find Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and to some extent Seventh-Day Adventists also echo this accusation. Indeed, many Evangelicals do so, ranging from the bizarre Chick Publications-types who view Constantine as a pagan conspirator and corruptor of Christianity, to others who simply see him as confused, such as Ben Witherington III in his otherwise excellent book *The Gospel Code*, which attacks Brown's book.³ What therefore was Constantine's faith and how genuine was his Christianity? By 'Christian' we are not alleging that Constantine would necessarily qualify

for membership in a contemporary Evangelical church.

Did Constantine have ulterior motives in declaring himself to be Christian?

The first issue to consider is what motive would Constantine have to declare himself a worshipper of the Christian God? Conspiracy theorists, such as the Muslim polemicist Misha'al al-Kadhi has this to say about Constantine:

On the one hand, Emperor Constantine, the pagan emperor of the Romans, began to notice the increasing number of converts to the new faith among his subjects. They were no longer a petty fringe sect of no great concern to the empire, rather, their presence was becoming increasingly noticeable.⁴

In fact, Christians were very much a minority: 'At the time of Constantine's conversion (312) Christians made up a small minority of the empire's population, say 10 per cent'.⁵ Thus, there was no political incentive for Constantine to convert to an often-despised minority faith – in fact, by doing so, he endangered his support among the overwhelmingly pagan population. Moreover, the one group he needed to maintain his position as Emperor in the West and extend his power was the *army*, who had proclaimed him Emperor in York after the death of his father in 306. The army was amongst the *least* Christian sectors of Roman society. All that Constantine needed to do to gain Christian support – if he needed it at all – was to promise religious toleration, especially pertinent to the position of Christians after what they had suffered in the recent Great Persecution. This he did along with his ally (at the time) Licinius in the Edict of Milan:

Perceiving long ago that religious liberty ought not to be denied ... we had given orders that every man, Christians as well as others, should preserve the faith of his own sect and religion ... we have granted to these same Christians freedom and full liberty to

observe their own religion ... And we decree still further in regard to the Christians, that their places, in which they were formerly accustomed to assemble ... shall be restored to the said Christians.⁶

What about Constantine's conversion and vision/dream?

Constantine's conversion is usually dated to 312 prior to the battle at the Milvian Bridge by Rome. The earliest reference is found in the work of Lactantius (died c. 320), a tutor to Constantine's son Crispus, and therefore arguably an authoritative source both in terms of dating and of proximity to the person of Constantine himself:

Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the *heavenly sign* to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of Christ.⁷

This sign is known as the *Labarum*, the Chi-Rho symbol, after the Greek letters x r, the first two letters in name xristov *Christos*, the Greek for Christ. Lactantius presents the battle very much in terms of a supernatural conflict, with Constantine's pagan enemy Maxentius consulting the Sibylline books, a pagan Roman oracle, which apparently told him that 'On the same day the enemy of the Romans should perish'.⁸ The next witness is Eusebius of Caesarea, the famous church historian:

Being convinced, however, that he [*Constantine*] needed some more powerful aid than his military forces could afford him, on account of the wicked and magical enchantments which were so diligently practiced by the tyrant, he sought Divine assistance, deeming the possession of arms and a numerous soldiery of secondary importance, but believing the co-operating power of Deity invincible and not to be

shaken. He considered, therefore, on what God he might rely for protection and assistance. While engaged in this enquiry, the thought occurred to him, that, of the many emperors who had preceded him, those who had rested their hopes in a multitude of gods, and served them with sacrifices and offerings, had in the first place been deceived by flattering predictions, and oracles which promised them all prosperity, and at last had met with an unhappy end.⁹

Eusebius then declares that Constantine informed him of a miracle from the Christian God that provided guidance and aid. Eusebius was a member of Constantine's court. Thus, whilst we should not ignore possible propagandistic elements, the narrative has some authority:

Accordingly he called on him with earnest prayer and supplications that he would reveal to him who he was, and stretch forth his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven ... He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, Conquer by this. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle.¹⁰

As with the report from Lactantius, Eusebius informs us that a dream was then sent to Constantine:

in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.¹¹

The fact that Lactantius and Eusebius, both close

to Constantine, separately relate this narrative indicates that Constantine really believed that he had received some sort of supernatural indication from Christ.

Eusebius specifically claims that Constantine told him about the supernatural guidance, and also indicates that after receiving these supernatural manifestations, Constantine sent for Christians to understand more about the faith.¹² Eusebius then presents Constantine's conquest of Rome, where the Emperor indicated his faith in the Deity who supported him:

Accordingly, he immediately ordered a lofty spear in the figure of a cross to be placed beneath the hand of a statue representing himself, in the most frequented part of Rome, and the following inscription to be engraved on it in the Latin language: *by virtue of this salutary sign, which is the true test of valor, I have preserved and liberated your city from the yoke of tyranny. I have also set at liberty the Roman senate and people, and restored them to their ancient distinction and splendour.*¹³

In his earlier work *Church History*, Eusebius does not go into such detail, perhaps because he was much less personally acquainted with Constantine at that point, but nonetheless, he once again presents the conflict between Constantine and Maxentius as a supernatural battle

2 Constantine ... first took compassion upon those who were oppressed at Rome, and having invoked in prayer the God of heaven, and his Word, and Jesus Christ himself, the Saviour of all, as his aid, advanced with his Whole army, proposing to restore to the Romans their ancestral liberty.

3 But Maxentius, putting confidence rather in the arts of sorcery than in the devotion of his subjects, did not dare to go forth beyond the gates of the city.¹⁴

The pertinent factor is that Constantine directed prayer to the Christian God, and believed himself to have been guided and aided by this deity, as opposed

to one of the Roman pantheon.

The other indication that Constantine believed himself to have been directed and assisted by the Christian God is his conduct upon entry into Rome, where he overthrew the tradition of sacrificing to the Roman pantheon in a very public manner:

Constantine's next act did nothing to reassure anyone: in a scandalous break with tradition, he did not ascend the Capitoline Hill, where victorious generals were supposed to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods in the giant Temple of Jupiter Maximus.

Why did he not sacrifice? We may be sure that the Christian clergy with him had sternly warned him not to participate in any sacrifices to the Roman gods...

Constantine went straight to the palace, where he offered private prayers to the Christian God.¹⁵

It is hard to explain such extraordinary behaviour unless Constantine was convinced that he owed his triumph to the Christian God, and so he was prepared to listen to the servants of that God about attitudes to the pagan pantheon. Moreover, we should consider the logistics and strategic character of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge itself. Constantine had 'inferior forces', whilst Maxentius could easily have remained behind its indomitable walls.¹⁶ Instead, Maxentius left the security of Rome's walls to confront the enemy, even rasher when we consider that he had the river Tiber at his own back. Chadwick comments: 'It was such unaccountable folly that Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge (312) seemed a signal manifestation of celestial favour.'¹⁷

Pagan accounts of Constantine's conversion and faith: the Roman Senate

Of course, both Lactantius and Eusebius are Christian sources, and so the historical method will look for corroborating evidence from *antagonistic* i.e. pagan sources. The earliest pagan indication of

Constantine's belief in the Christian God is found in regard to the erection of the Arch of Constantine in 315 by the Senate of Rome to commemorate his victory. The inscription read:

To the emperor Caesar Flavius Constantinus Maximus, Pius Felix Augustus, the Roman Senate and the People have [lit., has] dedicated [this] arch, [as] the mark for triumphs because, by the inspiration of divinity [and] by the greatness of [his] mind, he with his army has avenged with just weapons the republic at one time as much from the tyrant as from all his party. To the liberator of the city. To the founder of quiet.¹⁸

What is significant is that the pagan Senate ascribed Constantine's victory to *Instinctu Divinitatis* – the 'inspiration of divinity'. Professor Hall has suggested that a parallel, known to Constantine, is to be found in the phrase *instinctu divino* in Cicero's *De divinatione*, referring to prescience of future events.¹⁹ She continues:

The connotation of the phrase was preserved into late antiquity, not only by the continued study of Cicero but also through such authors as Livy, Seneca, the panegyrists, and Lactantius. Constantine demonstrated his knowledge of Cicero's text in a speech given in 324. The senate's appropriation of this term for the arch-inscription suggests that even pagans may have accepted some version of the "vision" of Constantine as early as 312–315.²⁰

Hall notes that the unusual character of the phrase indicates that the story of Constantine's vision/dream in 312 was current in Rome before the time of the erection of the Arch in 315:

Because an expression like *instinctu divinitatis* ... does not conform to the usual expressions of praise on triumphal arches, one is prompted to inquire further into the ideas that would have resonated in the minds of contemporary readers. A careful analysis of the contemporary implications of the term *instinctu*, as used in the arch inscription and other accounts,

suggests that the story of Constantine's "vision" (or "inspiration" by *divinitas*) was already current in Rome at a time close to the victory over the "tyrant."²¹

The fact that the story of the Emperor's vision was generally known to the Roman populace, of whatever religion, in the crucial period 312–315 indicates that the narrative of the supernatural guidance given to Constantine was not the invention of later Christian writers such as Lactantius and Eusebius, but most certainly goes back to Constantine himself. In connection with this, we should note that Hall also quotes a pagan panegyric (oration of praise) from 313, the year following Constantine's victory over Maxentius, which also indicates popular belief in a vision/dream that enabled the successful outcome:

According to the panegyrist, Constantine won a victory that was "divinely promised" by communicating in some way with God and disregarding unfavorable predictions given by soothsayers.

What god (*deus*), what majesty so immediately encouraged you, when almost all of your comrades and commanders were not only silently muttering but even openly fearful, to perceive on your own, against the counsels of men, against the warnings of soothsayers, that the time had come to liberate the City? ... It was plain to those who pondered the matter deeply ... that you sought no doubtful victory but one divinely promised.

Constantine's reliance on divine inspiration, rather than on soothsaying, coincides with the Ciceronian hierarchical categories of ways of foreknowing the future. Soothsaying was an artificial means, but dreams and visions were natural conduits of messages from divine forces. It is worth noting that while soothsaying had pagan connotations, dreams and visions were considered acceptable in the Christian tradition as ways to receive advice from God about future events.²²

It follows that Constantine's account of the vision/dream given by Christ must have been communicated to the general public. The Senate, being pagan, might have balked at naming Christ as the author of the victory over Maxentius, and so a more nebulous phrase such as the 'divinity' was employed: 'The inscription was carefully worded in terms that would not only honor the victor but would also be in harmony with the religious and cultural beliefs of the pagan senate.'²³

It should be noted that in Græco-Roman religion the god who acted as the object of divination and the giver of supernatural guidance, such as at the Delphic Oracle, was *Apollo*. Had Constantine believed that Apollo was his guide at the 312 battle, it is hard to imagine the Senate being reticent about naming that particular deity. Hall comments: '...the senators must have congratulated themselves on the ambiguity of expression that not only did not offend the *imperator*, but could also leave open avenues of further discussion of the exact nature of *instinctu divinitatis*.'²⁴

Pagan accounts of Constantine's conversion and faith: Zosimus, Eunapius and Julian

An important, though highly biased and polemical pagan source is found in the *Historia nova* by Zosimus, 'the early Byzantine pagan historian and civil servant'.²⁵ This is how Zosimus, writing about the late fifth and early sixth centuries, presents the Battle of Milvian Bridge:

Constantine, advancing with his army to Rome, encamped in a field before the city, which was broad and therefore convenient for cavalry. Maxentius in the mean time shut himself up within the walls, and sacrificed to the gods, and, moreover, consulted the Sibylline oracles concerning the event of the war. Finding a prediction, that whoever designed any harm to the Romans should die a miserable death, he applied it to himself, because he withstood those that

came against Rome, and wished to take it. His application indeed proved just. For when Maxentius drew out his army before the city, and was marching over the bridge that he himself had constructed, an infinite number of owls flew down and covered the wall. When Constantine saw this, he ordered his men to stand to their arms.²⁶

We see the same indications of a supernatural conflict, with Maxentius invoking the Roman gods and consulting the Sibylline oracles. However, rather than the vision and dream given by Christ, in this account Constantine sees a descent of owls, the species of bird associated with ill omens by Romans, notably in battles, and the fact that a flock of owls purportedly descended on Maxentius' geographical position for Romans would have spelled his doom. Zosimus was writing much later than our two previous sources, and his work has the polemical motive of showing that disaster followed the abandonment of the old religion.²⁷ He used as one of his sources the work by the pagan sophist Eunapius of Sardis called the *Lives of the Sophists*, written c. 395.²⁸ Whilst not examining the conversion of Constantine, he leaves no doubt that he considered Constantine to be a Christian, referring to the sophist Sopater trying to 'wean Constantine away from Christianity by the force of his learned arguments' and of the Emperor 'pulling down the most celebrated temples and building Christian churches'.²⁹

The other figure to consider is that of Julian the Apostate, a relative of Constantine, who later became Emperor. Julian wrote a satire entitled *The Caesars*, where he mocks Constantine trying to find a deity who would accept him:

There too he found Jesus, who had taken up his abode with her [*Pleasure*] and harangued all comers: 'Whosoever is an adulterer, whosoever is a murderer, whosoever is accused and wicked, let him be of good cheer and come; for I will wash him in this water and

at once make him clean, and, if he falls into the same sins again, I will allow him to smite his breast and strike his head and come clean.' To him Constantine came gladly, when he had conducted his sons forth from the assembly of the gods.³⁰

The important point is that Julian, as with Zosimus and Eunapius, considered Constantine to be a Christian. At this juncture we should refer to an allegation made by Julian and Zosimus in relation to the motivation of Constantine's conversion, although the only important fact for our consideration is that Constantine was considered to be a Christian. That allegation, implied in Julian's satire, and explicitly stated by Zosimus, is that Constantine only converted because of guilt over the death of his son Crispus and his own wife Fausta.

Zosimus claims that Crispus was suspected of an affair with Constantine's wife Fausta, and that subsequently, and successively, both were executed.³¹ In fact, the crisis seems to have been a dynastic dispute, with Fausta questioning the loyalty of Crispus, and after his execution herself dying, whether deliberately as a result of Constantine's anger at her false accusation or otherwise being unclear.³² Zosimus then makes some extraordinary claims about the aftermath and the reasons for the founding of Constantinople:

As he had these crimes on his conscience, and moreover, had paid no attention to his promises, he went to find the priests and asked them for expiatory sacrifices for his misdeeds; the latter had replied that no method of expiation existed which was effective enough to cleanse such impieties.³³

This seems a very fanciful notion: Roman Emperors before Constantine had often been very bloodthirsty, such as Nero and Caligula, and it does not seem that the pagan religious authorities had much problem accommodating them! Zosimus then states that an Egyptian from Spain, probably meaning Bishop Hosius (Ossius) of Cordoba, a close confidant of

Constantine, then met the Emperor and informed him that 'the Christian belief destroyed all sins and included the promise that unbelievers who were converted would immediately be purged of all crimes.'³⁴ Hearing this, Constantine 'detached himself from the ancestral rites' and converted.³⁵ Zosimus then states that 'When the traditional feast-day arrived, during the course of which the army had to climb up to the Capitol and carry out the traditional rites, Constantine ... withdrew from the holy ceremony and aroused the hatred of the senate and people.'³⁶

One major problem with this presentation is that Zosimus seems to have a very confused view of the historical timeline. The execution of Crispus occurred in 326 – whereas, as we have seen, there are already indications of Constantine's Christian faith as early as 312. This is the very point made by the early church historian Sozomen:

I am aware that it is reported by the pagans that Constantine, after slaying some of his nearest relations, and particularly after assenting to the murder of his own son Crispus, repented of his evil deeds, and inquired of Sopater, the philosopher, who was then master of the school of Plotinus, concerning the means of purification from guilt. The philosopher – so the story goes – replied that such moral defilement could admit of no purification. The emperor was grieved at this repulse, but happening to meet with some bishops who told him that he would be cleansed from sin, on repentance and on submitting to baptism, he was delighted with their representations, and admired their doctrines, and became a Christian, and led his subjects to the same faith.³⁷

We can see how the story was essentially a pagan polemic, and that the tales could not even agree with each other, with Zosimus claiming that Constantine approached the Roman pagan priests, whilst others claimed that the Emperor approached

Sopater. Sozomen refutes such claims by pointing to the problem with the timeline:

It appears to me that this story was the invention of persons who desired to vilify the Christian religion. Crispus, on whose account, it is said, Constantine required purification, did not die till the twentieth year of his father's reign; he held the second place in the empire and bore the name of Caesar and many laws, framed with his sanction in favor of Christianity, are still extant. That this was the case can be proved by referring to the dates affixed to these laws, and to the lists of the legislators.³⁸

Sozomen rightly points out that Constantine's pro-Christian legislation – framed together with his son, who was his second in command, *ante-dates* the killing of Crispus, which totally undermines any pagan polemic about Constantine embracing Christianity after the death of Crispus. Moreover, Sopater seems to have come into contact with Constantine subsequent to the Emperor's move to Byzantium, as Eunapius indicates in his work, and Sozomen also observes:

It does not appear likely that Sopater had any intercourse with Constantine whose government was then centered in the regions near the ocean and the Rhine; for his dispute with Maxentius, the governor of Italy, had created so much dissension in the Roman dominions, that it was then no easy matter to dwell in Gaul, in Britain, or in the neighboring countries, in which it is universally admitted Constantine embraced the religion of the Christians, previous to his war with Maxentius, and prior to his return to Rome and Italy: and this is evidenced by the dates of the laws which he enacted in favor of religion.³⁹

Finally, Sozomen makes the same point that we observed earlier – that the idea that Hellenistic religion could not provide expiation from grievous sin was simply not true:

But even granting that Sopater chanced to meet the emperor, or that he had epistolary correspondence with him, it cannot be imagined the philosopher was

ignorant that Hercules, the son of Alcmena, obtained purification at Athens by the celebration of the mysteries of Ceres after the murder of his children, and of Iphitus, his guest and friend. That the Greeks held that purification from guilt of this nature could be obtained, is obvious from the instance I have just alleged, and he is a false calumniator who represents that Sopater taught the contrary.

I cannot admit the possibility of the philosopher's having been ignorant of these facts; for he was at that period esteemed the most learned man in Greece.⁴⁰

Zosimus further alleges that such was the uproar in Rome about the deaths of Crispus and Fausta that Constantine decided to quit the city to search for a new capital.⁴¹ Again, Zosimus gets the timeline wrong. Crispus was killed in 326; Constantine had already decided to establish Byzantium as the new capital in 324, following his victory over Licinius at Adrianople and Chrysopolis.⁴²

Did Constantine actually consider himself to be Christian?

Both the Christians and pagans of Constantine's era considered him to be a Christian and not a pagan. The final question is therefore: how did Constantine consider himself? Again, we are not investigating whether Constantine's conduct was in keeping with New Testament ethics, nor whether he would be successful in an application to join a modern Evangelical congregation. Our sole concern is whether Constantine believed himself to be a Christian.

We have already seen indications from the accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius that Constantine stated that he had been guided by the Christian God at the 312 battle against Maxentius, and the pagan panegyric of the following year and the Senate's inscription on the Arch of Victory also point towards Constantine claiming supernatural guidance from Christ. The important point is that these all

derive from Constantine's personal testimony. Among the evidences in this regard are his letters: 'his letters from 313 onwards leave no doubt that he regarded himself as a Christian whose imperial duty it was to keep a united Church.'⁴³ The first we will examine is his *Second Letter to Anulinus* (the proconsul of Africa), issued in 313:

it is my will that those within the province entrusted to thee, in the catholic Church, over which Caecilianus presides, who give their services to this holy religion, and who are commonly called clergy men, be entirely exempted from all public duties, that they may not by any error or sacrilegious negligence be drawn away from the service due to the Deity, but may devote themselves without any hindrance to their own law. For it seems that when they show greatest reverence to the Deity, the greatest benefits accrue to the state.⁴⁴

This indicates that Constantine saw the proper worship of the Christian God as essential to the public welfare – a notion difficult to understand if he considered himself to be a pagan. In 314, Constantine sent a letter to Aelafius summoning the Council of Arles to resolve the Donatist controversy, which points to his own faith in the Christian deity:

since I am well aware that you also are a worshipper of the most High God, that I consider it by no means right that contentions and altercations of this kind should be hidden from me, by which, perchance, God may be moved not only against the human race, but also against me myself, to whose care, by His heavenly Decree, He has entrusted the direction of all human affairs, and may in His wrath provide otherwise than heretofore. For then shall I be able to remain truly and most fully without anxiety, and may always hope for all most prosperous and excellent things from the ever-ready kindness of the most powerful God, when I shall know that all, bound together in brotherly concord, adore the most holy God with the worship of the Catholic religion, that is His due.⁴⁵

Constantine here expresses the belief that he owes his reign to the providence of the Christian God, and that the Almighty might act in judgment against him and all humanity if the peace of the Church is disturbed. Parallel to this letter is another sent to Chrestus, bishop of Syracuse, inviting him to Arles concerning the same issue:

some, forgetful both of their own salvation and of the reverence due to the most holy religion, do not even yet bring hostilities to an end ... on account of all this it has happened that those very ones who ought to hold brotherly and harmonious relations toward each other, are shamefully, or rather abominably, divided among themselves, and give occasion for ridicule to those men whose souls are aliens to this most holy religion.⁴⁶

The significance of this letter is that Constantine seems to distinguish himself from 'those men whose souls are aliens to this most holy religion', implying that his own soul is not 'alien' to Christianity. The aftermath of the Council of Arles in 314 caused Constantine to issue this letter, which is explicit in its testimony of Christian faith:

Constantine Augustus, to his dearest brothers, the Catholic Bishops, Health! The everlasting and worshipful, the incomprehensible kindness of our God by no means allows the weakness of men to wander for too long a time in the darkness. Nor does it suffer the perverse wills of some to come to such a pass as not to give them anew by its most splendid light a saving passage, opening the way so that they may be converted to the rule of justice. I have indeed experienced this by many examples. I can also describe it from myself. For in me of old there were things that were far from right, nor did I think that the power of God saw anything of what I carried amongst the secrets of my heart. Surely this ought to have brought me a just retribution, flowing over with all evils. But Almighty God, who sitteth in the watchtower of Heaven, hath bestowed upon me gifts

which I deserved not. Of a truth, those things which of His Heavenly kindness He has granted to me, His servant, can neither be told nor counted.⁴⁷

Note that Constantine addresses the Bishops as 'brothers', that he acknowledges that he previously wandered in 'darkness', but that now he was 'converted to the rule of justice' through the kindness of Almighty God. He continues in this theme, again addressing the Bishops of 'Christ the Saviour' as 'my dearest brothers', and referring to those who separated themselves from the Catholic Church as having been turned by 'the wickedness of the devil'.⁴⁸ He refers to Christianity as 'the truth', and those who reject affiliation with the true Church as having 'joined themselves to the Gentiles' (i.e. pagans). Constantine comments that he himself awaits 'the judgement of Christ', and then makes a very clear distinction between how Christians ought to act, and how pagan conduct themselves:

Why then, as I have said with truth, do wicked men seek the devil's services? They search after worldly things, deserting those which are heavenly... They have made an appeal, as is done in the lawsuits of the pagans. For pagans are accustomed sometimes to escape from the lower courts where justice may be obtained speedily, and through the authority of higher tribunals to have recourse to an appeal. What of those shirkers of the law who refuse the judgement of Heaven, and have thought fit to ask for mine? Do they thus think of Christ the Saviour?⁴⁹

Again, Constantine explicitly differentiates himself from the pagans in this passage. A couple of years or so later, Constantine sent a letter to the bishops and people of Africa, in which he described Christianity as 'our faith': 'In no way let wrong be returned to wrong, for it is the mark of a fool to snatch at that vengeance which we ought to leave to God, especially since our faith ought to lead us to trust that whatever we may endure from the madness of men of this kind, will avail before God for the grace

of martyrdom.'⁵⁰ If we jump a few years, to the situation following the defeat of Licinius in the East, we find in a letter that the Emperor sent to the people of Palestine, that Constantine emphasises the difference between Christianity and paganism, notes how pagan oppressors such as (by implication) Maxentius and Licinius have suffered defeat, expresses belief in one God, and urges everyone to worship him:

To all who entertain just and sound sentiments respecting the character of the Supreme Being, it has long been most clearly evident ... how vast a difference there has ever been between those who maintain a careful observance of the hallowed duties of the Christian religion, and those who treat this with hostility or contempt ...

(And by Divinity is meant the one who is alone and truly God, the possessor of almighty and eternal power: and surely it cannot be deemed arrogance in one who has received benefits from God, to acknowledge them in the loftiest terms of praise.)...

it remains for all ... to observe and seriously consider how great this power and how efficacious this grace are, which have annihilated and utterly destroyed this generation ... of most wicked and evil men ... both to honor the Divine law as it should be honored.⁵¹

It is difficult to reconcile these passages with any idea that Constantine considered himself to be a pagan. Further evidence at this time comes from a letter to the people of the Eastern provinces, where he refers to the Great Persecution being the result of the oracle of Apollo declaring that '*the righteous men on earth were a bar to his speaking the truth*', the 'righteous' being identifies with the Christians, hence their persecution, and Constantine goes on to refer to this 'impious deliverance of the Pythian oracle' which 'exercised a delusive power' over the persecuting Emperors.⁵² Remember that Apollo was the Sun-god, and here Constantine refers to a major supposed function of this deity – oracular guidance

– as being ‘impious’ and ‘delusive’. In contrast, Constantine identifies with the Cross of the Christ:

Not without cause, O holy God, do I prefer this prayer to thee, the Lord of all. Under thy guidance have I devised and accomplished measures fraught with blessings: preceded by thy sacred sign I have led thy armies to victory: and still, on each occasion of public danger, I follow the same symbol of thy perfections while advancing to meet the foe.⁵³

Constantine also expressed his belief that Mankind was fallen in sin, and that God sent His Son to overcome the ‘powers of evil’ in the world, in words reminiscent of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: ‘And, although mankind have deeply fallen, and have been seduced by manifold errors, yet hast thou revealed a pure light in the person of thy Son, that the power of evil should not utterly prevail, and hast thus given testimony to all men concerning thyself.’⁵⁴

In a letter to Eusebius, Constantine hopes that people ‘will now acknowledge the true God’.⁵⁵

A letter to the churches following the Council of Nicæa has Constantine speaking about the observance of the date of Easter, in which he again clearly identifies himself with the faith of the Christians, referring to Christ as ‘our Saviour’, and His Passion, and ‘our most holy religion’:

it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin ... For we have it our power, if we abandon their custom, to prolong the due observance of this ordinance to future ages, by a truer order, which we have preserved from the very day of the passion until the present time. Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Saviour a different way. A course at once legitimate and honorable lies open to our most holy religion.⁵⁶

Following the Council, Constantine wrote a letter concerning Arius, where he compared the heresiarch

to Porphyry, the famous pagan writer who attacked Christianity, denoting him as ‘that enemy of piety’.⁵⁷

Had Constantine really considered himself to be a pagan, he would not have designated Porphyry in this way. In Constantine’s oration *To the Assembly of the Saints*, usually dated c.325, he refers to ‘the Spirit of the Father and the Son’, and attacks polytheism and idolatry, satirising the idea that the many gods breed to ‘excess’ and denouncing the sculptor ‘who idolizes his own creation, and adores it as an immortal god’.⁵⁸ He goes on to refer to ‘Christ, the author of every blessing, who is God, and the Son of God’.⁵⁹

One final point that is worthy of consideration is Constantine’s family. His mother Helena, was a Christian who helped to popularise pilgrimage to the Holy Land by her example, and his children were raised to be Christians. After all, Constantine secured the services of Lactantius – a Christian – to be the tutor of his children. If Constantine was actually a pagan, why would he do all this? There is thus a threefold testimony: the contemporary Christians considered Constantine to be a Christian, and not a pagan; the contemporary pagans considered him to be a Christian, and not a pagan; and Constantine considered himself to be a Christian, and not a pagan.

The Religious policy of Constantine

Chadwick notes that Constantine ‘even assigned a fixed proportion of provincial revenues to church charity’.⁶⁰ He gave the famous Lateran palace, formerly owned by his wife Fausta, to the Bishop of Rome.⁶¹ This probably happened in 313, and if so, coming so soon after his victory over Maxentius, it displays an extraordinary devotion to the Christians. In Rome, Constantine also ordered the construction of the original St. Peter’s basilica in c.326. In

Jerusalem, he had the Church of the Holy Sepulchre erected. On the Mount of Olives Constantine built the Church of the Ascension and at Bethlehem the Church of the Nativity. He also constructed major church buildings at Mamre and in Gaza.

Of course, it is the choice of Byzantium and the construction of the city of Constantinople that gives us further insight into the religious policy of Constantine. Constantine chose Byzantium as the site of his new capital in response to a divinely-sent dream:

God appeared to him by night, and commanded him to seek another spot. Led by the hand of God, he arrived at Byzantium... and here he was desired to build his ... In obedience to the words of God, he therefore enlarged the city formerly called Byzantium, and surrounded it with high walls.⁶²

Sozomen also observes – with evident glee – that the city had a definite Christian ethos, free from paganism:

As this city became the capital of the empire during the period of religious prosperity, it was not polluted by altars, Grecian temples, nor sacrifices; and although Julian authorized the introduction of idolatry for a short space of time, it soon afterwards became extinct. Constantine further honored this newly compacted city of Christ, named after himself, by adorning it with numerous and magnificent houses of prayer.⁶³

Eusebius also happily records the Christian character of the 'New Rome':

And being fully resolved to distinguish the city which bore his name with especial honor, he embellished it with numerous sacred edifices, both memorials of martyrs on the largest scale, and other buildings of the most splendid kind, not only within the city itself, but in its vicinity: and thus at the same time he rendered honor to the memory of the martyrs, and consecrated his city to the martyrs' God ... he

determined to purge the city which was to be distinguished by his own name from idolatry of every kind, that henceforth no statues might be worshiped there in the temples of those falsely reputed to be gods, nor any altars defiled by the pollution of blood: that there might be no sacrifices consumed by fire, no demon festivals, nor any of the other ceremonies usually observed by the superstitious.⁶⁴

Hence, Constantinople was a 'New Rome' indeed – resembling the old in terms of being the Imperial centre, having a Senate and so forth, but entirely innovative in its religious character:

A visitor to Constantinople soon after its foundation would have been struck by the fact that there was no public sign of pagan worship. The gods of Greece and Rome were conspicuously absent. If he were a pagan, he might walk to the Acropolis and gaze sadly on the temples of Apollo, Artemis, and Aphrodite, in which the men of old Byzantium had sacrificed, and which Constantine had dismantled but allowed to stand as relics of the past. From its very inauguration the New Rome was ostensibly and officially Christian. Nor did the statue of the founder, as a sun-god, compromise his Christian intention. In the centre of the oval Forum, which he laid out on the Second Hill just outside the wall of the old Byzantium, he erected a high column with porphyry drums, on the top of which he placed a statue of Apollo, the work of an old Greek master, but the head of the god was replaced by his own. It was crowned with a halo of seven rays, and looked towards the rising sun.⁶⁵

At this point we should recall the claim of *Before Nicaea* that 'The Pagan Roman Emperor, Constantine' was 'himself considered to be an incarnation and embodiment of the sun god!!' This may be based on a misunderstanding about the statue to which the quoted passage refers. The very fact that that it was originally a statue of Apollo, but was in a sense desecrated (from a pagan perspective) by being transformed into a statue of the Emperor militates

against this understanding. That Constantine was opposed to any pagan worship of himself is demonstrated by 'his rescript to the people of Hispellum (AD 337) where he allows them to establish a cult temple to his family but refuses to let it be "defiled by the conceits of any contagious superstition."' ⁶⁶ That is, Constantine was willing to have a *building* dedicated to his family, but not that pagan liturgical practices should be directed toward him.

The actual evidence suggests that the statue of the sun-god, transformed into the likeness of Constantine, was simply part of the decoration of Constantinople: 'Statues plundered from pagan shrines were used to adorn its squares and building, thus being secularized or even given a Christian interpretation.' ⁶⁷ A classic example is the fact that Constantine placed in the forum 'a statue of the mother goddess Cybele', although 'she was represented in attitude of prayer, which caused an uproar among the pagan populace.' ⁶⁸ Zosimus complains about this:

As there was at Byzantium a very large market-place ... at the end of one of them ... he erected two temples; in one of which was placed the statue of Rhea, the mother of the gods ... through his contempt of religion he impaired this ... changing the position of the hands. For it formerly rested each hand on a lion, but was now altered into a supplicating posture, looking towards the city.⁶⁹

Again, by this action, Constantine was indicating that Rhea-Cybele was not a proper object of worship. In contrast, Eusebius eagerly reports the Christolatry of Constantine in his new capital:

On the other hand one might see the fountains in the midst of the market place graced with figures representing the good Shepherd, well known to those who study the sacred oracles, and that of Daniel also with the lions, forged in brass, and resplendent with

plates of gold. Indeed, so large a measure of Divine love possessed the emperor's soul, that in the principal apartment of the imperial palace itself, on a vast tablet displayed in the center of its gold-covered paneled ceiling, he caused the symbol of our Saviour's Passion to be fixed, composed of a variety of precious stones richly inwrought with gold. This symbol he seemed to have intended to be as it were the safe guard of the empire itself.⁷⁰

One major change that Constantine enacted was that henceforth, the Lord's Day, i.e. Sunday, ceased to be a normal day of work, but received the public sabbatarian character that was typical of Britain until the closing decades of the twentieth century:

He also enjoined the observance of the day termed the Lord's day, which the Jews call the first day of the week, and which the pagans dedicate to the sun, as likewise the day before the seventh, and commanded that no judicial or other business should be transacted on those days, but that God should be served with prayers and supplications. He honored the Lord's day, because on it Christ arose from the dead, and the day above mentioned, because on it he was crucified.⁷¹

Against any idea that Constantine set apart Sunday because it was 'the day of the Sun' in the sense of honouring the Sun-god, it should be noted that he also honoured other Christian festal days:

A statute was also passed, enjoining the due observance of the Lord's day, and transmitted to the governors of every province, who undertook, at the emperor's command, to respect the days commemorative of martyrs, and duly to honor the festal seasons in the churches: and all these intentions were fulfilled to the emperor's entire satisfaction.⁷²

The Cross which he claimed to have supernaturally viewed and which he saw as the sign of victory was apparently special in his estimation, to the extent that he forbade crucifixion as a practice, and also employed the symbol of the cross on his coins:

He regarded the cross with peculiar reverence, on account both of the power which it conveyed to him in the battles against his enemies, and also of the divine manner in which the symbol had appeared to him. He took away by law the crucifixion customary among the Romans, from the usage of the courts. He commanded that this divine symbol should always be inscribed and stamped whenever coins and images should be struck, and his images, which exist in this very form, still testify to this order.⁷³

Often, the fact that initially Constantine retained Roman gods on his coins is suggested as evidence of hybrid religiosity. However, it is noteworthy that these disappear following his victory over Licinius – that is, after he became sole Emperor, and was less inhibited about ignoring pagan opinion: ‘Little more than a decade after Constantine’s conversion the ancient gods and goddesses of the Graeco-Roman pantheon ceased to appear upon the official coinage and public monuments of the Empire. The personifications – Victoria, Virtus, Pax, Libertas, Securitas, etc., and the ‘geographical’ figures of Res Publica, Roma, Tellus, cities, countries, and tribes-remained.’⁷⁴ The reason these were retained was not *theological*: the fact is that no one really conceived of these entitles as ‘person s existing objectively and independently of men, activities, states and places’ in the sense of the Roman pantheon.⁷⁵

Increasingly, Constantine undermined paganism, without forbidding it altogether. He forbade the practice of private sacrifice, for example.⁷⁶ He used Licinius’ harassment of Christians as the *casus belli* to launch what amounted to a religious war against him.⁷⁷ One of most indicative aspects of Constantine’s reign in this regard is his preparation for his death. He was only baptised as he lay dying, but at the time this was common practice.⁷⁸ He had wanted to be baptised in the river Jordan, like Jesus

Himself. However, it is Constantine’s resting place that is most suggestive of his faith:

The Church of the Holy Apostles stood in the centre of the city, on the summit of the Fourth Hill. It was built in the form of a basilica by Constantine, and completed and dedicated by his son Constantius. Contiguous to the east end Constantine erected a round mausoleum, to receive the bodies of himself and his descendants. He placed his own sarcophagus in the centre, and twelve others (the number was suggested by the number of the Apostles) to right and left.⁷⁹

Constantine wanted to be buried, symbolically at least, with the Apostles, just as he had wanted to be baptised in the Jordan in emulation of Christ.

CONCLUSION

The threefold cord we have observed – the testimony of Christians, that of pagans and of Constantine himself display that he was seen by all – including himself – to be a Christian. His words and actions towards Christians and pagans point to his belief in Christ. Moreover, everything he did in relation to religion was open and forthright. The idea that he was some kind of pagan conspirator is completely devoid of evidence. Whether it was right for the Church to get so close to the State is a different matter altogether.

©Dr Anthony McRoy, London, 2007

References

1. Brown, Dan, *The Da Vinci Code*, (London: Corgi edition 2004), p. 312ff.
2. Al-Ashanti, AbdulHaq, and Bowes, Abdur-Rahman, *Before Nicea: The Early Followers of Prophet Jesus*, (UK: JamiahMedia, 2005), p. 47.
3. Witherington, Ben, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Da Vinci*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 63.
4. al Kadhi, Misha'al, *What Did Jesus Really Say*, <http://wings.buffalo.edu/sa/muslim/library/jesus-say/ch1.2.5.html>.
5. Mango, Cyril, 'New Religion , Old Culture', *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, ed. Mango, Cyril, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 96.
6. Eusebius Pamphilus, 'Church History', Chapter V. *Copies of Imperial Laws*, NPNF 201.
7. Lactantius, *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died*, Chapter XLIV, ANF07.
8. Ibid.
9. Eusebius Pamphilus, *The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*, Chapter XXVII, NPNF 201.
10. Ibid., Chapter XXVIII.
11. Ibid., Chapters XXIX-XXX.
12. Ibid., Chapter XXXII,
13. Ibid., Chapter XL. (Italics mine).
14. Eusebius, *Church History*, Book IX, Chapter IX, NPNF 201.
15. Dungan, David L., *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament*: (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 100-101.
16. Chadwick, Henry, *The Early Church*, (Penguin, London, 1967, 1984 edition), p. 123.
17. Ibid.
18. Hall, Linda Jones, 'Cicero's instinctu divino and Constantine's instinctu divinitatis: The Evidence of the Arch of Constantine for the Senatorial View of the "Vision" of Constantine', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.4 (1998), p. 648.
19. Ibid., p. 647.
20. Ibid., p. 648.
21. Ibid., p. 649.
22. Ibid., p. 660f.
23. Ibid., p. 648f.
24. Ibid., p. 671.
25. Lieu, Samuel N. C., & Montserrat, Dominic, *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine views*, a source history, (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 12.
26. Zosimus, *New History*. London: Green and Chaplin (1814). Book 2, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/zosimus02_book2.htm (See also partial quote in Lieu & Montserrat, p. 15, where it refers to 'screech owls' appearing on the walls, and Constantine seeing this and responding to it).
27. Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 173.
28. Lieu & Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian*, p. 12.
29. Ibid., p.11, and Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* (1921) pp. 343-565. English translation, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eunapius_02_text.htm. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eunapius_02_text.htm
30. Lieu & Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian*, p. 18.
31. Ibid, p. 16.
32. Murdoch, Adrian, *The Last Pagan: Julian the Apostate and the Death of the Ancient World*, (Stroud: Sutton, 2003, 2005), p. 11.
33. Lieu & Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian*, p. 17.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Sozomen, Church History, Book I, Chapter V, NPNF 202.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Lieu & Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian*, p. 19.
42. Sarris, Peter, 'The Eastern Roman Empire from Constantine to Heraclius (306-641)', *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, p. 22.
43. Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 127.
44. Eusebius, *Church History*, Book X, Chapter VII, NPNF 201.
45. 'Letter of Constantine to Aelafius', in Opatatus of Milevis, *Against the Donatists*, (1917) Appendices 3-16. pp. 382-431, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/optatus_11_appendices.htm
46. Eusebius, *Church History*, Book X, Chapter V, NPNF 201.
47. 'Letter of Constantine to the Catholic Bishops', Opatatus of Milevis, *Against The Donatists*, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/optatus_11_appendices.htm
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. 'Letter of Constantine to the bishops and people of Africa', Opatatus of Milevis, *Against The Donatists*, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/optatus_11_appendices.htm
51. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Chapters XXIV-XLII, NPNF 201.
52. Ibid., Chapters XLVIII-LXI.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., Chapter XLVI.
56. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book III, Chapter XVIII, NPNF 201.
57. Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book I, Chapter IX, NPNF 202.
58. *The Oration of the Emperor Constantine*, Chapter IV, NPNF 201.
59. Ibid., Chapter XI.
60. Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 128.
61. Ibid.
62. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book II, Chapter III, NPNF 202.
63. Ibid.
64. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book III, Chapter XLVIII.
65. Bury, J. B., *History of the Later Roman Empire from the death of Theodosius I to the death of Justinian*, Vol. I, (London: Macmillan, 1923; New York: Dover, 1958), p.74, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/BURLAT/3*.html
66. Lenski, Noel (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 4.
67. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 119.
68. Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 127.
69. Zosimus, *New History*, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/zosimus02_book2.htm
70. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book III, Chapter XLIX.
71. Ibid.
72. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book IV, Chapter XXIII.
73. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book I, Chapter VIII.
74. Toynbee, J. M. C., 'Roma and Constantinopolis in Late-Antique Art from 312 to 365', *Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 37, (1947), p. 135.
75. Ibid.
76. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book IV, Chapter XXV.
77. Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 129.
78. Ibid., p. 127.
79. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the death of Theodosius I to the death of Justinian*, p. 77, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/BURLAT/3*.html