

Would Christianity Have Survived if it had not become the State Religion in the Fourth Century?

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The fourth century began with the persecution of Christianity by the State and ended with the State appointing Christianity as the sole religion of the State. The new relationship thus created had significant consequences not only for the Byzantine Empire and subsequent world history, but also upon the theology and cosmology of the Christian Church.

However, what if the State had not adopted Christianity as the State religion in the fourth century? Would Christianity have survived, and if so, in what form would it have survived? To a theologian such questions are childish babblings. For God, through his economy of salvation, is carrying out his divine plan to progress and prepare his people for the second parousia. Therefore, the march of Christianity is both inevitable and inexorable as the Church militant prepares for the Church triumphant. On the other hand, to a historian such speculation is invaluable as it allows for a proper evaluation to be made of the dynamics of the unique association thus created.

This essay will undertake an assessment of the relationship that was created between the Church and State. Thereafter, it will consider whether the use of force or change in State policy, as exemplified by Julian the Apostate, could have undone the progress of the Church towards its marriage with the State. Finally, an assessment will be made as to whether, if at all, Christianity would have survived if it had not become the State Church of the fourth century, in order to determine the true value of that association to the Church.

Some Initial Comments

In considering the historic evidence, it is important to recall that, although Orthodox religious works abound, there is a "dearth of documentary and archival records"¹ left by the Byzantine Empire. Further, all surviving writings have through the life of the Empire been subject to religious scrutiny. Works deemed heterodox were quickly condemned under the aegis of the State. It is therefore reasonable to assume that

secular works may well have undergone some redaction and scrutinization by subsequent Chroniclers to make them acceptable to their times. Further, Chroniclers of the time viewed history as sacred and under the guidance of God. Therefore, caution should be exercised to mitigate assumptions, bias and ideologies made by those historians so as not to distort or misrepresent the nature and strength of the relationship created by the State with the Church.

A Short History of the Church in the Fourth Century

Between 303 to 311 the Church faced its greatest persecution. In a series of four edicts, Christians had their Churches confiscated, their sacred works condemned and destroyed, their clergy subjected to death, and were deprived of their civil rights. Although more rigorously enforced in the East the outlawed Church of the Christians was under significant attack from the State.

In 313 the edict of Milan, issued by co-emperors Constantine I in the West and Licinus in the East restored to Christians their confiscated property and granted to all citizens the liberty to worship whomever or whatever they pleased. At the same time, Christian clergy joined their pagan and Jewish counter parts in being made exempt from government taxes. Thus, the Church became legalized and stood shoulder to shoulder with the pagan Gods and cult of the emperor. In gratitude:

Christianity the one fruitful source of strength to the Byzantine conception of imperial authority had bestowed on Constantine himself the exalted title of Equal of the Apostles, which his successors always retained²

Thereafter, apart from the reign of Julian, the Church began to grow in influence. Between 375 to 383 pagan temples were confiscated and privileges to their priests withdrawn. In February 380 Theodosius I, then sole ruler, passed an edict bestowing the cultivation of religion solely upon Christians. In June of 381, Arianism and Eunomianism were declared heterodox, their followers forbidden to assemble and their churches ordered to be handed over to the Catholic Church. In July 383, a further edict was published prohibiting all heretical worship. At this point, although paganism still continued, it was clear that the State had secured for itself an integral role in the life of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The State, thus, obtained for its own ends a religion that purported to embrace the oeukmene. Although the State did impose uniform laws, coinage and systems of Government in its territory, it quickly realized that the most useful tool for organizing and binding society embracing a diversity of peoples' languages and cultures was religion. To an Emperor what could have more authority than being declared God's representative on earth, for as Eusebius of Caesarea (260 -339CE) put it:

As the Word of God expresses God's will, in the Creation of the world, so the Emperor expresses the will of God in the government of the civilized world and fulfils his role by his imitation of the word or logos by his Logamimesis.³

To Eusebius, the Emperor was "pre-eminent in every virtue that true religion can confer"⁴ and was seen as having a position half way to heaven as the elect of God. Hence, to a State centered in Constantinople, there was every value in promoting a special relationship of "One God, one Empire, one Religion"⁵ This ensured that "The Emperor was now raised above the Church which gave him a number of prerogatives."⁶ In addition to returning to the Church its property and exempting clergy from taxation and public service the State, to further bind the Church, the State became a large contributor to the coffers of the Church. This financial support together with stipends and endowments made churches wealthy and allowed Christianity to carry out its own outreach. It also meant that being a cleric was rapidly endowed with real status, for the State acknowledged and allowed bishops to perform a secular judicial function in remote bishoprics. Thus, by degrees, the Church was incorporated:

Within the framework of the State. This meant that it was to become a 'State Church' which was not only under the special protection of the State, but also subject to its direction, a development facilitated by the fact that the aims of both were identical. Both had to win the world for Christ⁷

Persecution and Julian (361 - 363)

During the life of the nascent Church, whenever a particular calamity required a scapegoat, the State saw Christians as "soft targets" and sporadically persecuted them. However, persecution created dissention and weakened the social fabric of the State. The last great persecution in the early fourth century failed because it had:

Caused widespread disgust and the principal persecutor Galerius recognized his failure by promulgating on his death bed the great Edict of Tolerance of the fourth century, the Edict of Sardica⁸

Thus the State, early in the fourth century, had come to the conclusion that persecution as a weapon and policy of control had totally failed against Christianity.

One aberration in the progress of Christianity towards centrality of power was provided by Julian who ruled from 361 to 363. Julian, who converted from Christianity to paganism, tried to derail the growing strength of Christianity. According to Socrates Scholasticus, a fifth century Church historian, Julian saw himself as a reincarnation of Alexander the Great. In 362 he decreed pagan temples be reopened and removed subsidies and stipends from the Church, redirecting them to pagan temples. He further banned Christians as teachers and recalled all exiled bishops back to their original bishoprics to disarray the Church. The extremely unpopular Julian died in 363 with his short reign causing great dissension in the Empire. With his death died any further attempt to restore paganism. As a result of this failed experiment, the State realized it was not possible to return to the pagan Gods of yesteryear, and was committed irrevocably to the religion of the Christians.

The Value of Recognition to the Church

The Church, previously persecuted, now found itself in the centre of power, which instilled gratitude to the State as secular redeemer. However, the focus of the Church was on orthodoxy and orthopraxis, hence religious disputes had to be resolved correctly. As Runciman points out "The main attention of the Byzantine was very reasonable on those little details that would open or close to him the gates of heaven."⁹ The State, however, expected gratitude to translate to compliance, which did not occur, thus ensuring conflict and tension in this new relationship.

This did not mean of course that the Church was moribund or incapable in coming to terms with its own awareness. The Church did develop theologically, liturgically and ecclesiologically under the protection of the Emperor. It also found the ability to provide a social welfare function which relieved the State of that of responsibility. As instance, according to Mango,

The Church of Antioch at the end of the fourth century provided for three thousand widows and virgins, in addition to invalids, strangers, prisoners and beggars. What is more, it did so without expending its capital.¹⁰

This capacity appeared spread across the Empire with the Church in Alexandria being able to "act as banker to the business community (whilst) at the same time the Patriarch of Alexandria was said to have 7500 beggars in his care."¹¹ Thus, as the patriarchates became wealthy, they assumed the vital part of promoting social stability and hence the State saw value in the wellbeing of the Church.

To better administer itself, the Church employed administrators, secretaries, legal advisers and staff to keep functioning, as well as actively engaging in a building program for the glory of God. The position of bishop became dualistic – certainly they continued their spiritual function as shepherds for their flock but now they also needed managerial skills to dispense local justice, oversee works, regulate markets and otherwise administer for the secular needs of their area. Thus "with the public recognition of the Church in the fourth century all the bishops found themselves enjoying the status of senior imperial officials."¹²

As the Church became a significant employer with a strong organizational structure it attracted the faithful as well as the socially ambitious to service. As instance, Eusebius of Nicomedia was enthroned bishop of Berylus, but despite nomocanons to the contrary, transferred as bishop of Nicomedia where he cultivated the favour of Constantina the wife of Licinius and sister to Constantine I. From there he ended up, despite supporting Arianism, as bishop of Constantinople, the confessor to Constantine I, as well as baptizing him into the faith. Thus, some men took up religion as an astute career move despite laws passed by the State to stop such abuses.

Intervention by the State in the Church

The State had little hesitation in interpolating itself in Church disputes if it deemed it necessary to its interests during the life of the Empire. This attitude is best exemplified by the problems created by Arius who in 318 brought into dispute the co-eternity of the Father and the Son. His heresy occupied both Church and State and required two ecumenical councils (325 and 381) to lay it to rest. This saga highlighted the pre-occupation of the Church to get its theology right to combat the flawed soteriology of

Arius. It also highlighted the discord between Alexandria and its tradition of allegorical interpretation to scripture and Antioch with its rational historic and literal hermeneutical approach. The saga also reflected upon the duplicatcitous nature of some clergy such as Esubius of Nicomedia who attempted to impose upon the Church their revised vision of Arianism.

However, the greatest highlight was the tension between the Church and State, as the State attempted to dictate theology for the sake of expediency. The State's involvement began modestly enough. In 324, Constantine, under the influence of the Antiochene, Esubius of Nicomedia, demanded that Alexandria enter into communion with Arias. When that failed he determined in 325 to summon a Council at Nicea - a right which the State subsequently retained. After Arius and his teachings were condemned, Constantine acted quickly to exile those anathematized, banning their writings and decreeing death to those harbouring such works, for the State "regarded heresy as a crime against the State, consequently it was the State authorities and not the Church that took part against it."¹³

After Eusebius had returned from exile he ingratiated himself with Constantine I and persuaded him that the Council at Nicea had erred into Seballianism. The Emperor, as a result, convened Councils at Tyre and Jerusalem in 325 to condemn, inter alia the defender of the Orthodox position, Athanasius to exile. Thus, the unbaptised Constantine from the very first saw no difficulty with trying to impose his will upon the theology of the Church for the good governance of the State.

Thus, the stage was set for an ongoing, difficult, tense and ambivalent relationship between Church and State which depended upon the force of personalities involved that defined the relationship at any one time. For instance, in 355 Constantinus II took the view that the Church was under his control and what he wanted should be regarded as canon law. Bishop Athanasius on the other hand took the view that ecclesiastic authority was independent of the Emperor. Ambrose of Milan made it clear to Theodosius I who had elevated the Church to the status it enjoyed that the Emperor was in the Church and not over it. Later, John Chrysostom took the extreme view that the Emperor had been subordinated by Holy Law to the hands of the priests thus placing the State under the Church. Therefore, the power dynamic did, depending on

the circumstances, shift between the Church and State and generally to the frustration of the State. Although this interdependent relationship has in the past been interpreted as one of caesaropapism despite the fact that "the Emperor did not possess priestly power but was dependant on the priesthood for the performance of religious rites",¹⁴ it is clear that the State in its pursuit of its own interests did try to bend the Church to do its bidding on the altar of political expediency, although generally without real success on matters important to the Church.

What if?

What if Christianity had not become the State religion, would it have survived? Clearly, Christianity had survived well enough despite the fact that, as Dix puts it,

For two hundred and fifty years from Nero to Constantine to be a Christian was in itself a capital crime, always liable to the severest penalty, even when the law was not enforced.¹⁵

Persecutions as policy by the State had been tried but found ineffective. By 250 the Church had developed firm organizational lines throughout the Empire with each city having a bishop and a number of clergy to assist him. The church was moving towards a settled text for scripture and for liturgy as well as developing a theology that was held Orthodox throughout the Empire. It also was able to convene councils, and defend itself from within by overcoming the heresies of docetism, gnosticism, marcionism, unitarianism, sebellianism, montanism and novationism, to name a few. It was able to assert as part of its own identity the notions of apostolic succession, the rule of faith, as well as developing clear practices in baptism, liturgy, and other sacramental growth. It had developed its own outreach by caring for the widows, orphans and the young. It had a growing list of martyrs who died for their faith to act as exemplars for the faithful. It had, though writers such as Clement, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Origen to name a few, the ability to defend and define itself against the pagan intelligentsia. It had Churches, creeds and councils. In short, the church derived little direct impetus from becoming a state church. Thus, no doubt the church would have survived.

Had the State not been tempted to take a part in the Church, it may well be argued that there would have been advantage to the Church. In these circumstances, it would

not have to contend with the manipulations and machinations of the State to be part of policy of the State. Further, the Emperor became to see himself as the first Christian and increasingly appropriated a role for himself befitting the guardian of the Church. Thus, he became increasingly clothed in the ceremonial garments of the Church and light, fire and incense were carried before him on occasions, and in Church he was incensed as the representative of God. As further proof of being Gods "anointed," the left side of the imperial throne was dedicated to Christ, and left vacant on Church festal occasions. This melding of the identity of the Rule of the secular and temporal caused a growth in monasticism as there were Christians who fled into the desert to escape the secularization of their faith. Had the Church not been so recognized, then such a need to flee the world of men would not have been as extensive as it in fact was. In short, Rome, Antioch and Alexandria would have continued to provide for the affairs of the faithful, and the State, having determined persecution as being against its own good order, would have been irrelevant to the affairs of the Church.

Conclusion

In adopting Christianity and increasingly employing that as a basis for policy, the State acted to assure the unity of the Empire. The Church for its part, however, was more concerned with bearing witness to the true teaching whilst preparing for the second coming. Hence the interests of the Church intersected with those of the State only when events and circumstances impacted upon the Church. On the other hand, the State wanted clear definition of faith that allowed for clear laws and hence a well-maintained society.

This desire meant that the relationship between Church and State was uneasy and at times volatile. The Emperor ruled his Empire as one and likewise expected the Church to be homogenous and even in its interests. Unfortunately, due to cultural and political considerations, the Church was being placed under pressure especially by the State and its self-promotion. Berandino claims for instance, in relation to Arianism, that "without the intervention of Constantinus there is a strong probability that the conflict would have been limited to the East"¹⁶ and not impacted upon the West. Therefore, whatever the claim of the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church may be, the State found itself with a religion that was beginning to fracture from pressures imposed by a

State that had little understanding for religious niceties let alone insight as to what effect its policy had on the una sanctum of the Church.

Had the State not made the Church the State religion, then this drift in unity may have not been as divisive as subsequent events provided. If the church was not feted with the trappings of secular power it may well have remained united as it met the challenges from without and within. It is clear that prior to the State imposing itself upon the Church, the Church was coping and growing whilst maintaining the rule of apostolic succession and rule of faith in a maturing structure that was looking after the needs of the flock. What the State did in elevating Christianity to the State Church was to appropriate to itself the notion of being divinely favoured.

That the Byzantine Empire lasted in various forms until 1453 is proof that Constantine I was astute in selecting Christianity as a state religion. This marriage linked Church and State in a relationship which profited the State far more than the Church. Thus, it is inevitable to conclude that the Church would not only have survived but may have been better off if it had resisted the overtures of the State and maintained its independence serving its King rather than being a bulwark for the State.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ C, Mango. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. (Phoenix Ltd, London, 1998)
- ² The Cambridge Medieval History. Vol 4, P11. *Government Church and Civilization*. Ed. by J M. Hussey (Cambridge University Press, 1978, Ch 20) P7
- ³ Eusebius. *The History of the Church*. Translated G.A. Williamson (Penguin Books, London, 1989) P12
- ⁴ Eusebius. *The History of the Church*. Translated G.A. Williamson (Penguin Books, London, 1989) P332
- ⁵ C, Mango. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. (Phoenix Ltd, London, 1998) P88
- ⁶ The Cambridge Medieval History. Vol 4, P11. *Government Church and Civilization*. Ed. by J M. Hussey (Cambridge University Press, 1978, Ch 20) P105
- ⁷ The Cambridge Medieval History. Vol 4, P11. *Government Church and Civilization*. Ed. by J M. Hussey (Cambridge University Press, 1978, Ch 20) P104
- ⁸ *Byzantium, An Introduction to East Roman Civilization*. Ed. by N. Baynes and H. Moss (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1948). P89
- ⁹ Runciman, S. *Byzantium Civilization*. (G Arnold and Co., London, 1933) P108
- ¹⁰ C, Mango. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. (Phoenix Ltd, London, 1998) P37
- ¹¹ C, Mango. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. (Phoenix Ltd, London, 1998) P38
- ¹² Wybrew. *The Orthodox Liturgy: The development of the Eucharist Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite*. (SPCK, London, 1989)
- ¹³ S, Runciman. *Byzantium Empire*. (G Arnold and Co., London, 1933) P114
- ¹⁴ The Cambridge Medieval History. Vol 4, P11. *Government Church and Civilization*. Ed. by J M. Hussey (Cambridge University Press, 1978, Ch 20) P106
- ¹⁵ Dix, Dom Gregory. *The Shape of the Liturgy*. (A & C Black, London, 1960)
- ¹⁶ Di Berardino, Angelo. *Patriology* Vol. 4. (Placid Solacte Christian classics, Allen, Texas, 1977) P3

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