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Transmission and Interpretation of Christian Legends and Stories the Modern Challenge to Christianity

Abstract

This paper examines the incorporation of legends, their interpretation and influence on the Christian history. The focal point is Constantine's vision, which gave a boost to the spread of Christianity and transformed the Roman Empire. It can be said that Constantine's conversion served as a pattern in similar cases of rulers that have converted to Christianity after a miraculous event. Furthermore, these conversions are an example of how stories and legends can determine the relationship between the Christian Church and the State. Lastly, it is shown that every legend or story can be used for political expedience or spiritual development,



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according to the interpretation given.

Keywords

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1 Introduction

At the beginning of the 4th c. AD, Christians in the Roman Empire probably comprised ten percent of the population. However, by 325 AD it had become clear that Christianity was the emperor's preferable religion and by the end of the same century it had become the official religion of the empire. Consequently the 4th c. AD was an extremely critical period in the history of the Church.

It is almost certain that Emperor Constantine (312-337), the son of a Christian woman and a pagan man, embraced Christianity. At the end of his life, he confided to Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea that in 312 AD, on the eve of the crucial battle against Maxentius in the Milvian Bridge, he had seen a celestial vision with the Christian symbol of the cross and the phrase "In this sign, conquer". Constantine fought with this emblem on his banner and when the God of Christians granted him victory, Constantine embraced Christianity.

Whether it is a real event or a later invention of the emperor who wanted to impress the bishop, the story of Constantine's conversion played a great role in Christian thought. Later, other rulers, such as Clovis I (481-511) converted in a similar way. Constantine and Eusebius, who wrote his biography, wanted to give the impression that the conversion was the result of a miracle that had taken place in the battlefield. Although Constantine's attitude toward Christians showed that to some extent he

had understood the Christian doctrine, Orthodoxy was for him mainly a matter of political expedience.

Undoubtedly, Constantine's conversion is a fact of great importance. Apparently, the emperor hoped to use a relatively new religion, most of whose followers seemed very emotionally attached to their faith, to counterbalance the Romans' faltering faith in their traditional deities. The consequences of this conversion initiated a closer relationship between the Christian Church and the State, a relationship that is not based only on political expedience but also on stories, legends and dreams, which resonate in the Orthodox world.

2 Constantine's Personality

Who was really Constantine the Great? Was he a faithful believer of Christ, a saint whom the Eastern Orthodox Church venerates? Or was he just another Roman despot with exceptional military and administrative capabilities? Edward Gibbon does not spare laudatory comments on Constantine's personality:

The person, as well as the mind, of Constantine, had been enriched by nature with her choicest endowments. His stature was lofty, his countenance majestic, his deportment graceful; his strength and activity were displayed in every manly exercise, and from his earliest youth, to a very advanced season of life, he preserved the vigor of his constitution by a strict adherence to the domestic virtues of chastity and temperance. He delighted in the social intercourse of familiar conversation; and though he might sometimes indulge his disposition to raillery with less reserve than was required by the severe dignity of his station, the courtesy and liberality of his manners gained the hearts of all who approached him. The sincerity of his friendship has been suspected; yet he showed, on some oc-

casions, that he was not incapable of a warm and lasting attachment¹.

According to Jacob Burckhardt: "Constantine never assumed the guise of or gave himself out as a Christian but kept his free personal convictions quite unconcealed to his very last days²". Apart from this, Constantine was driven by ambition and lust for power:

There can be no question of Christianity and paganism, of conscious religiosity or irreligiosity, such a man is essentially unreligious, even if he pictures himself standing in the midst of a churchly community. Holiness he understands only as a reminiscence or as a superstitious vagary. Moments of inward reflection, which for a religious man are in the nature of worship, he consumes in a different sort of fire. World-embracing plans and mighty dreams lead him by an easy road to the streams of blood of slaughtered armies. He thinks that he will be at peace when he has achieved this or the other goal, whatever it may be that is wanting to make his possessions complete³.

Probably the most sober dispassionate judgement of Constantine's personality is given by Timothy Barnes:

The Constantine who has emerged in the preceding chapters was neither a saint nor a tyrant. He was more humane than some of his immediate predecessors, but still capable of ruthlessness and prone to irrational anger. As an administrator, he was more concerned to preserve and modify the imperial system which he inherited than to change it radically—except in one sphere. From the days of his youth Constantine had probably been sympathetic to

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Vol. 2, p. 102.

² Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, trnsl. Moses Hadas, (Routledge: London, 1949), p. 261.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 292.

Christianity, and in 312 he experienced a religious conversion which profoundly affected his conception of himself. After 312 Constantine considered that his main duty as emperor was to inculcate virtue in his subjects and to persuade them to worship God. Constantine's character is not wholly enigmatic: with all his faults and despite an intense ambition for personal power, he nevertheless believed sincerely that God had given him a special mission to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity⁴.

Certainly, he was a remarkable man who set the motion for a series of transformations not only in the Roman Empire but in the whole world as well. The government structure, developed by Diocletian, was based on the city or town magistrates. Above them were the governors of more than a hundred provinces and higher in authority the vicars of the praetorian prefects in charge of fourteen dioceses along with the praetorian prefects. It was a pyramid structure of various levels of bureaucracy. Constantine did little to change Diocletian's system, but his main innovations according to Timothy Barnes were two: "a praetorian prefect was attached to each emperor who had a separate court to act as his deputy; and praetorian prefects were appointed to govern defined geographical areas⁵." Another interesting fact is that Constantine created a state hierarchy, which was handed down to the Byzantine Empire the glimpses of which are evident in today's titles of Orthodox Church officials. As Edward Gibbon states:

⁴ Timothy Barnes, *Constantine And Eusebius*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University press, 1981), p. 275. On Constantine's conversion see also: Norman H. Baynes, "Constantine the Great and the Christian Church", Vol. XV (1972); A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, (London: The English Universities Press, 1965).

⁵ Timothy Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*, (Hoboken NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), p. 158.

In this divine hierarchy (for such it is frequently styled) every rank was marked with the most scrupulous exactness, and its dignity was displayed in a variety of trifling and solemn ceremonies, which it was a study to learn, and a sacrilege to neglect. The purity of the Latin language was debased, by adopting, in the intercourse of pride and flattery, a profusion of epithets, which Tully would scarcely have understood, and which Augustus would have rejected with indignation. The principal officers of the empire were saluted, even by the sovereign himself, with the deceitful titles of your Sincerity, your Gravity, your Excellency, your Eminence, your sublime and wonderful Magnitude, your illustrious and magnificent highness⁶.

Such pompous forms of addressing have become common in many languages. They seem to come from the late Roman times due to the administrative reforms, established by Diocletian and continued by Constantine. For example a full professor in Italian is addressed as an “Illustrious/Enlightened” (chiarissimo professore), a diplomat as “His Most Reverend Excellency”, while the Pope is “His Holiness” and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople is “His All Holiness” (Παναγιώτατος).

3 Constantine’s Vision

The most important change that Constantine introduced to the empire was endorsing Christianity. In 313 AD Constantine and Licinius declared that “it was right that Christians and all others

⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Vol. 2, (2010), p. 71; Ramsay McMullen, *Constantine*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 196: “What strikes the reader are the rather long-winded, explanatory, adjectival expressions employed here, characteristic of Constantine in his letters, speeches, and public proclamations, and standing midway along the road to a fully inflated Byzantinism”.

should have freedom to follow the kind of religion they favoured; so that the God who dwells in heaven might be propitious to us and to all under our rule.⁷” Moreover the Edict of Milan goes a step further than the earlier Edict of Serdica by Galerius in 311 AD, by restoring confiscated Church property: “Churches received by gift and any other plaes formerly belonging to Christians to be restored. Owners may apply for compensation.⁸” Nevertheless, it seems interesting to detect the actual reasons Constantine advocated Christianity. According to his self-appointed biographer Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, who claimed to have heard the story from Constantine himself, the emperor was on campaign, when “about the time of the midday sun, when day was just turning, he said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, “By this conquer”.⁹” The rhetorician Lactantius, writing about twenty years before Eusebius, presented a different version in *The Death of the Persecutors* (*De mortibus persecutorum*):

The day was approaching on which Maxentius had taken command, that is, the sixth day before the November Kalends, and the fifth anniversary celebration was being ended. Constantine was warned in quiet to mark the celestial sign of God on his shields and thus to engage in battle. He did as he was ordered. He inscribed the name of Christ on the shields, using the initial letter X, crossed by the letter I with its top portion bent.¹⁰

⁷ *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder, (New York:Oxford University press, 1999), p. 17.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, trnsl. Averil Cameron & Stuart G. Hall, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 81.

¹⁰ Lactantius, *The Minor Works*, “The Death of the Persecutors”, trnsl. Sister Mary Francis McDonald, (The Catholic University of America Press: Washington D.C., 1965), pp. 190-191.

The matter becomes more complicated if we consider another vision that Constantine experienced in 310 AD. According to an anonymous panegyric of the emperor, Constantine saw Apollo accompanied by Victory, offering him laurel crowns, each of which brought an omen of thirty years of rule¹¹. Of course, such reports have to be taken as facts seen through the particular lens of each author. Ramsay McMullen is right when he states that:

When writers of the third or fourth century recounted the rise of men to the throne, they naturally included, because they naturally found in legend or written sources, or themselves though it only fitting to embroider, various tales of portents: to Hadrian, auspicious predictions through the sortes Virgilianae, Sybylline verses, or the temple of Jupiter at Necephorium; to Antoninus Pius, the sign of a crown mysteriously transferred from the head of an image of the god to his own statue; to Vespasian (in Suetonius), an apparition in a temple proffering sacred boughs and garlands¹².

What conclusions can today's reader draw from the various stories of Constantine's encounters with the divine? In 1993, Peter Weiss sought to explain by arguing that the vision of Apollo in 310 A.D. and Eusebius's vision of the cross were actually descriptions of the same event, but they were interpreted in a different way. Weiss argues that the laurel wreaths in the panegyric of 310 A.D. and the cross in Eusebius can both be explained by a phenomenon known as "solar halo", a wide range of atmospheric optical phenomena that occur when the sun or the moon shine through thin clouds composed of ice crystals. Solar halo phenomena can appear as parhelia, sun

¹¹ Ramsay MacMullen, *Constantine*, p. 65

¹² *Ibid.* 67.

pillars, tangent arcs, sun crosses and others, which are attributable to the reflection or refraction of sunlight or moonlight through ice crystals¹³. As Timothy Barnes asserts “ancient evidence always deserves priority of esteem over modern preconceptions, but sometimes it needs to be interpreted in the light of modern insights or scientific theories. In this case, any serious analysis of the vision or visions of Constantine must start from Cassius Dio’s precise description of the three stars which were seen in the sky in Rome in early April 193 and draw upon the considerable scientific literature about the solar halo phenomenon. Astronomers with no stake at all in the Constantinian question who have discussed his vision simply assume that Constantine saw a solar halo. By good fortune, Weiss had himself seen a solar halo in Würzburg some years before 1989.¹⁴”

The so-called Halo Hypothesis is considered a fair solution to the enigma of Constantine’s vision. On the other hand, such an explanation can be regarded as “too empiricist” or as a deceitful anachronism. However, we cannot deny that such phenomena as solar, lunar eclipses or the appearances of comets and earthquakes were interpreted by ancient people as supernatural messages from a deity. Another scholar, who agrees with the Halo Hypothesis, is Klaus M. Girardet¹⁵. Based on this evidence we can make the allegation that every vision of Constantine could be interpreted in order to assist him in his claim to autocratic rule, i.e. monarchy in the strict sense of the term, as it is

¹³ Peter Weiss, “The Vision of Constantine”, trnsl. A. R. Birley, *Journal of Roman Archeology* (2003), pp. 237-259.

¹⁴ Timothy Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*, (Hoboken NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), p. 76.

¹⁵ Klaus M. Girardet, *Der Kaiser und sein Gott: Das Christentum im Denken und in der Religionspolitik Konstantins des Großen*, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 35-41.

presented in the speech that Constantine gave in Trier¹⁶. The idea is strongly expressed and justified, because polytheism is an absurdity in comparison with the monotheism of Christianity. If there is one ruler in heaven, there is also one ruler on Earth; the cosmic monarchy means stability and order, while polytheistic polyarchy is a delusion that could result in chaos. The imposition of the monotheistic-monarchical model is not argued openly, but it is implied. The earthly government has to be an image, an imitation and a reflection of the heavenly order. Ten years after his speech in Trier, the Christian monarch Constantine realized perfectly the monarchy's triumph accompanied by monotheism's triumph¹⁷.

Even if Raymond van Dam does not seem to agree totally with this interpretation, he states that "not only was Constantine sometimes fickle in his attitudes toward Christianity; he also seemingly used Christian policies in order to advance a political agenda"¹⁸. However, what really matters is not the vision itself but the effect: the "generous statement of religious toleration seems so much more acceptable as a catalyst for the transformation of the Roman world, comparable to other progressive documents such as the Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence. Such a proclamation of universal pluralism seems to have been a preview of modernity, that is, our enlightened modernity, certainly preferable to a religious vision and its distasteful potential for theocracy and totalitarianism."¹⁹ Consta-

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 40.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Raymond Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 6.

¹⁹ Raymond van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 5; Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 269: The truth as Timothy Barnes states that: "The emperor also totally forbade praetorian prefects, vicarii of dioceses,

tine may have been tolerant to his subjects, who professed different from Christianity religions. However, such a thing cannot be said for all his successors. Policies against paganism started with Theodosius I, who reiterated Constantine's ban on pagan sacrifice and haruspicy on pain and death. These policies were continued by emperors Arcadius, Honorius, Theodosius II, Marcian and Leo the Thracian, who reiterated the bans, especially on pagan rites and sacrifices, and increased the penalties. What seems even more outrageous is the thousands non-christian writings that have been destroyed in great bonfires at the center of town squares. The unwanted religion went away along with the unwanted books²⁰.

4 The Interpretation of Vision as a Reinforcer of the Political Agenda and Impetus for Social Change

D.J Kyrtatas makes a great point in his book "The Social Structure of the Early Christian Communities" about Constantine's conversion to Christianity by showing the social repercussions that it had. Undoubtedly, the conversion of the emperor was crucial not only for the religious developments in the empire but also for the social ones. Of course one of the most important

and provincial governors to perform sacrifice before conducting official business. The emperor also totally forbade the consecration of pagan cult statues, the consultation of pagan oracles and the performance of pagan sacrifice, and instructed governors to provide public funds for building churches." What does this mean is that Constantine had a program for suppressing paganism and promoting Christianity

²⁰ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 4; See also Codex Theodosianus On Religion in; Catherine Nixey, *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World*, (Boston MA: Houghton Miffling Harcourt, 2018).

consequences was the gradual Christianization of the ruling classes, especially those in the new capital. Several members of the traditional aristocracy were converted because they realized that such an action was in their best interest as they would be please the emperor. Undoubtedly the new religion seemed to have the greatest success in the “new men” who Constantine promoted to higher ranks and positions – these “new men” were not eager to oppose the religious preferences of their patron²¹. Constantine had the financial and administrative power to provide substantial assistance to Christianity. The Christian emperor proclaimed himself a bishop over those outside the Church, thus declaring his apostolic intentions. Several important works have contributed to the meaning of Constantine’s conversion. Something that does not seem to have attracted much attention is the particular detail that Constantine converted to Christianity not by following the recommendations of some human agency, but after direct communication with God; at least that is what he and his biographers wanted the rest to believe. The idea of conversion through the intervention of a supernatural power is an essential feature of the early Christian mentality and a significant factor of the religious history of that period. The story of Constantine’s conversion follows a pattern well known to early Christians and aimed to serve a lofty purpose.

²¹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, p. 310: “Eusebius makes sweeping claims for the scale of Constantine’s bestowal of senatorial rank. But even if exaggerated, this extension of senatorial status, which allowed the re-entry of the Roman senatorial families into the government, besides admitting easterners and provincials to the order, laid the foundation for a major development during the late Empire” See also: Peter J. Heathen, “New Men for new Constantines? Creating an imperial elite in the eastern Mediterranean”, in *New Constantines. The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium 4th-13th Centuries. Papers from the Twenty-Sixth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (1992), pp. 11-33.

The complete description of Constantine's miraculous conversion before the battle of the Milvian Bridge was delivered 25 years following the event by Eusebius. Eusebius claims that the story was told to him by Constantine himself, when Constantine deemed him worthy to enter his circle of acquaintances and relatives. We have no reason to reject the possibility of such a discussion between the emperor and his biographer. Apart from that we tried to explain Constantine's vision in the former chapter and we saw that there are numerous and diverse hypotheses about it. One thing is sure however, such a vision along with the whole content of Eusebius's work *Life of Constantine* serves to exalt and justify the days and works of Constantine and promote his dynasty²². Moreover, Constantine's vision as Eusebius presents it, can be considered an interpretation of a former event. Actually this re-interpretation serves both the political interests of Constantine's dynasty, the Christian worldview of Eusebius and the political status quo of the Empire.

Constantine was attracted to monotheistic beliefs before his so-called conversion to Christianity. As Ramsay McMullen states "Constantine himself, for years after 312 A.D. continued to pay his public honors to the sun. They were paid in coin of the realm—rather, on coins, in the form of images of the emperor shown jointly with Sol; but other coins showed the Chi-Rho sign; so it was known that both compliments were acceptable to Constantine²³". Furthermore not only the Christians but also the pagans attributed the victories of Constantine to a supreme being²⁴. As we have seen Lactantius has a more modest version

²² Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, pp. 261-271.

²³ Ramsay McMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400*, (New Haven CO:Yale University Press, 1984), p. 44.

²⁴ Ramsay McMullen, *Constantine*, 70: "From him, Constantine received his throne. So said the orator. Through Sol, Constantine conquered on the Rhine

of the miracle that happened before the battle while Eusebius's version seems more miraculous, because not only "Constantine was warned in quiet to mark the celestial sign of God on his shields" as Lactantius asserts but also Constantine's army had seen the bright spectrum of the cross above the sky and at the same night Jesus appeared in Constantine's dream and gave him instructions that would lead him to secure victory²⁵.

As Kyrtatas asserts the story of the conversion is similar to Paul's miraculous conversion, as referred in the Acts²⁶. The miraculous conversion is mentioned for the first time, a few years after the incident in the 1 Epistle to the Corinthians, but without the details found in the Acts. Paul had serious reasons to claim to have seen the resurrected Christ in person because there were many who did not acknowledge his apostolic nature²⁷. Apart from this if Paul had been converted by a man, for example Peter, in cases of serious quarrels — and there have

in 310, and in gratitude glorified his "Companion" on his coins (plate IIIB). And when he marched toward Italy, it was, to pagans, surely that supreme being who granted a miracle.

²⁵ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, p. 81: „Thereupon, as he slept, the Chris of God appeared to him with the sign which had appeared in the sky, and urged him to make himself a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky, and to use this as protection against the attacks of the enemy.”

²⁶ Acts 9:3-9 (NRSV): „Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do. The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:1-2 (NRSV): "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the lord.

been several of them — he would have to submit to him. It was said that only those who had not learned the truth from mortal people were truly blessed (Matt. 16:17). Considering the fact that the most scholars accept that the books of Luke-Acts were written around 80-90 AD and the First Corinthians around 53-57 AD it is possible to infer that just as in the story of Constantine's conversion, Paul's brief description was gradually developed into a complete miracle.

It should be noted that according to tradition Constantine was not the first king who miraculously converted to Christianity. There is the so-called Abgar legend, which is based on a correspondence and exchange of letters between Jesus Christ and King Abgar V of Edessa. "The story is a genealogical myth of the kind familiar from Classical literature, which traces the origin of a community back to mythical or divine ancestor. One might think, in this connection, of the heroic ancestors of the Athenian genē, or the supposed descent of Rome's Iulii from Venus²⁸". The story of King Abgar V is found in its oldest form in Eusebius²⁹. Jesus Christ became famous because of his wonder-working power and the ill King Abgar when he heard about Jesus decided to contact him. Jesus sent him a letter, promising to send one of his disciples to heal Abgar. Apostle Thaddaeus was the one who went to Edessa and began by the power of God to heal every disease and weakness. Abgar sent Tobias to summon Thaddaeus to the palace. When Thaddaeus came to the palace Abgar had a miraculous vision while looking at him. Then Abgar asked him if he was a disciple of Jesus and Thaddaeus told him that since Abgar had faith in Jesus his request

²⁸ S. K. Ross, *Roman Edessa. Politics and Culture in the Eastern Fringe of the Roman Empire*, (Routledge: London 2001), p. 135.

²⁹ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. I., transl. Lake Kirsopp, LOEB, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), pp. 85-96.

will be granted. Therefore Thaddeus healed him and then Abgar gave him his permission to preach the word³⁰.

In an early 3rd-century text called *Acts of Thomas* there is the story of King Gundaphorus whom Thomas meets. The king ordered him to build a palace and gave him the needed coin and silver to realize it. However Thomas took everything and then went in the cities and surrounding villages, distributing the coin to the poor and needy and bestowing alms. When the king learnt that the palace was not built, he became angry and cast Thomas into prison. In the meantime, the king's brother Gad died and his soul going up in heaven saw a great palace built for his brother the king. The angels let the soul of Gad go in order to inform his brother about the palace in heaven. Gad returned to life and asked the king to sell him the palace and the king said, "A palace in heaven, where does this come to me from?". His brother answered, "It is the one that Christian built for you, the man who is now in prison". When the king realised where the coined silver had really gone he and his brother became Christians. It should be noted that even though the apostle had already met the king upon his arrival in India he made no effort to convert him. The king was led to Christianity by his own reflections. In this sense truth is something that was revealed to him, not taught. The narrative ends like this: "Being well disposed now toward the apostle, King Gundaphorus and his

³⁰ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy In Earliest Christianity*, transl. Robert A. Kraft, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) 2-24: Walter Bauer has argued persuasively that the story of Abgar is a pure fabrication without any connection to reality. According to him the converted King is a legendary figure There is no doubt that the aim of stories such this of Abgar is propagandistic; Alberto Camplani, "Traditions of Christian Foundation in Edessa Between Myth and History," *SMSR* 75(1/2009), pp. 251-278.

brother Gad followed him, never leaving him, providing for the poor, giving to all, and relieving all.³¹

Kyrtatas states that “although King Abgar V and King Gundaphorus were both historical personalities that lived during the first century AD, we cannot accept that there is any element of truth in these narratives.³²” The visions of the Christians, led them to consider emperors such as Tiberius, Severus Alexander and Philip the Arab as pious Christians³³. We do not know much

³¹ *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English translation based on M.R. James*, ed. J.K. Elliott, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 457.

³² Δημήτρης Ι. Κυρτάτας, *Ἐπίκρισις: Ἡ Κοινωνική Δομὴ τῶν Χριστιανικῶν Κοινοτήτων ἀπὸ τὸν Πρῶτο ἕως τὸν Τρίτο αἰῶνα*, μτφρ. Γιάννης Κρητικός, (Αθήνα: Ἐστία, 1992), p. 238.

³³ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. I: “Tiberius, therefore, in whose time the name of Christian came into the world, when this doctrine was reported to him from Palestine, where it first began, communicated it to the Senate, and made it plain to them that he favoured the doctrine, but the Senate, because it had not itself tested it, rejected it; but he continued in his own opinion and threatened death to the accusers of the Christians.” For heavenly providence had designed putting this in his mind in order that the word of the Gospel might have an unimpeded beginning, and traverse the earth in all directions.” 113. Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. II, trnsf. J.E.L. Outon, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932) 89: “When after six whole years Gordian brought his government of the Romans to an end, Philip along with his son Philip succeeded to the principate. It is recorded that he, being a Christian, wished on the day of the last paschal vigil to share along with the multitude the prayers at the church, but was not permitted to enter by him who was then presiding, until he confessed and numbered himself among those who were reckoned to be in sins and were occupying the place of penitence; for that otherwise, had he not done so, he would never have been received by [the president] on account of the many charges made concerning him. And it is said that he obeyed readily, displaying by his actions how genuine and pious was his disposition towards the fear of God.”; “One may wonder at both of these things under Valerian, and of them note especially the nature of his previous conduct. For not a single one of the emperors before him was so kindly and favourably disposed towards them, not even those who were said to have been openly Christians, as he manifestly was, when he received them at the beginning in the most intimate and friendly manner; indeed all his

about these stories, which were insinuating the conversion of these Roman emperors to Christianity, but it is reasonable to accept that in these cases also miracles could not be absent. According to Kyrtatas what we do know, including the story of Constantine's conversion, is enough to support the hypothesis of the existence of a common story-model of the conversion of Emperors, a story-model that prevailed in Christian thought³⁴. The question is the following: What led Christians to create such stories? As two or three generations had passed without any sign that the world was going to end, Christian activity strengthened by the exclusivity of Christianity and led to the idea of the inevitable ecumenical transformation. Origen is one of the supporters of this idea. It is evident by what he says in his work *Against Celsus* that we should honor the emperor and that the emperor will not be left alone and abandoned by God while the barbarians will also be converted to the word of God and be subjected to the laws and become civilized. According to Origen all religions will be abandoned and only the religion of the Christians will prevail because the Logos continually conquers a great number of souls³⁵. It is evident from this passage that one of the main aims of Christians were to convert the emperor, knowing that by converting the emperor then it would be easy to christianize the whole empire. Almost after two centuries of intense catechetical activity Christianity achieved significant success. However, there were still certain parts of the population that remained to a large extent not only unaffected by

house has been filled with godly persons, and was a church of God", p. 151. According to Kyrtatas this last excerpt insinuates, without mentioning their names, Severus Alexander and Philip the Arab.

³⁴ Δημήτρης Ι. Κυρτάτας, *Επικρισις: Η Κοινωνική Δομή των Χριστιανικών Κοινοτήτων από τον Πρώτο έως τον Τρίτο αιώνα*, p. 239.

³⁵ Origène, *Contra Celse*, t. IV, SC 150, trnsl. Marcel Borret, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1969), pp. 332-333

Christianity, but completely rejected it. Despite some exceptions, the aristocracy of the empire was one of the most important of these classes. The Christianization of the nobility seemed vital to Christians but at the same time challenging. However if the emperor became a Christian, he would have the power to persuade the elite of the empire. Nonetheless this power should not only be secular but also religious. Paul had once been accused because he were not a disciple of Jesus, so he responded that he had seen Jesus in person and received orders from him. Christian mentality attributes to pious emperors similar powers, something that Constantine and his successors understood and used it. Christian emperors helped Christianity to become a universal religion and to christianize the state elite and other groups of the population. In return, they secured control of the Church. Most of the great bishops, from the 4th c. and onwards came from aristocratic classes³⁶.

Following the conversion of the Empire, neighboring tribes and kingdoms began to convert to Christianity too. The pattern is well-known: first the king converted to Christianity then called on his subjects to follow him. Sozomenus gives such versions on the conversion of the Iberians and the Armenians. In both cases the kings converted to Christianity because of divine signs, miracles and revelations. This divine authority expressed by such incidents gave these kings the right to order their subjects to embrace the new religion³⁷.

³⁶ Δημήτρης Ι. Κυρτάτσας, *Επίκρισις: Η Κοινωνική Δομή των Χριστιανικών Κοινοτήτων από τον Πρώτο έως τον Τρίτο αιώνα*, p. 240.

³⁷ Sozomène, *Histoire Ecclésiastique*, trnsl. André-Jean Festugière, SC 306 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1983), pp. 260-265.

5 The Power of Stories, Tales and Legends: An Important factor for the Evolution of Religion

Apparently the use of tales, stories and myths to promote a political agenda or to urge a social change was not particular to Christianity but nonetheless Christians made use of it. Even more important than this is the fact that tales and stories have the power to change the minds of men, independently if they are true or imaginary. Martha Nussbaum, in *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, has noted:

Good literature is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not. Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts frequently painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions. One may be told many things about people in one's own society and yet keep that knowledge at a distance. Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront – and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation³⁸.

The encounter with aesthetic, storytelling language excites the imagination of the listener who interprets the world according to the stories they listen to. Moreover, the journey into the territory of the story takes the listener into the depths of themselves. In an era when TV was absent storytelling and reading was a conscious activity. Christians used this power unconsciously to create a conscious change in society. For example, it

³⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary imagination and public life*, (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1995), pp. 5-6.

does not matter if the story of Mark being the first to be sent to Egypt to preach the Gospel and establish churches in Alexandria is a myth³⁹, or of the first sermon made in Alexandria by Barnabas is a legend⁴⁰(CPG 1, 1015.4). What matters is triggering the imagination, because every story extends the connections of the listener or the reader, connecting them not only with past but with the present and the future as well. Christians instead of seeking to describe a reality already out there, sought to create a reality through their stories. The truth is that they almost succeeded or at least they believed that they succeeded. One of the most interesting facts about this re-interpretation and re-writing of stories is that even the moral examples of Christians are based on previous traditions. Christians extensively borrowed of Jewish and pagan martyrdom traditions. For example as Candida Moss states: “The influence of Iphigenia, Polyxena, and Antigone is discernible in the depiction of female martyrs in early Christianity. Female martyrs composed a significant proportion of early Christian martyrs and generated some of the most thought-provoking and dearly beloved narratives.⁴¹” Even the insistence of Church officials to imitate the Saints is derived from a tradition going back to the Greco-Roman world, when philosophers used stories with ethical examples as powerful tools to exhort their students to moral deeds because through the imitation of the words and actions of great men, it is possible to become like them. Moreover, the same idea is present in Jewish writers during the Hellenistic period, who used the same language to inspire their readers to live virtuous lives. These writers took their inspiration from

³⁹ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. I., p. 144.

⁴⁰ Κλήμης Ρώμης, *Homiliae*, PG 2, pp. 63-64.

⁴¹ Candida Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies and Traditions*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 32.

biblical figures such as Moses or Joseph. The same theme based in the imitation of Christ and then the imitation of martyrs is found in the early Christian literature⁴². Are all these stories true? We cannot be sure, we are not sure even if the depiction of Socrates by Plato or Xenophon is the authentic one. Each of the writers bears his own interpretation of Socrates's personality. For example Xenophon was determined to prove that Socrates was extremely useful and beneficial to his friends contrary to the Socrates of Plato, who basically kept his thoughts for himself and asked questions in order to reveal what virtue is⁴³. The same thing can be said about Jesus, the stories of the death of Jesus vary and are told in each of the four Gospels in a different way⁴⁴.

In summary, the assumption that religious stories define the belief and the teachings of whole religions can have liberating effects for the modern world, a world that increasingly becomes a single civilization. As the recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown, when things really work, everybody adopts them independently of religious or other beliefs. The assumption that stories are not static and can be re-interpreted can be liberating because as Yuval Noah Harari points:

⁴² Candida Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 20-23

⁴³ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 68-69; Thomas L. Pangle, *The Socratic Way of Life: Xenophon's Memorabilia*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018). Thomas L. Pangle assumes that Xenophon presents more authentically than does Plato the true teachings and way of life of Socrates. See also, Gabriel Danzig *Apologizing for Socrates: How Plato and Xenophon Created Our Socrates*, (Plymouth UK: Lexington Books, 2010); *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Socrates*, ed. Christopher Moore, (Boston: Brill, 2019).

⁴⁴ Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented A Story of Martyrdom*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), pp. 55-83,

Religions still have a lot of political power, inasmuch as they can cement national identities and even ignite the Third World War. But when it comes as solving rather than stoking the global problems of the twenty-first century, they don't seem to offer much. Though many traditional religions espouse universal values and claim cosmic validity, at present they are used mainly as the handmaid of modern nationalism — whether in North Korea, Russia, Iran or Israel. They therefore make it even harder to transcend national differences and find a global solution to the threats of nuclear war, ecological collapse and technological disruption⁴⁵.

Nationalistic ideas combined with religion can really alter our world and lead to major conflicts. The problem is evident especially in countries of Eastern Europe where Orthodoxy is being instrumentalized in order to support a nationalistic or imperialistic political agenda. Overall what nationalists in those countries do is to adapt the orthodox doctrine to their aims. They are creating stories that support their nationalistic agendas despite the fact that ethnic narrowness is alien to Orthodox Christianity. Of course each country in Eastern Europe has its own interesting particularities. For example, in Greece, the Orthodox Church enjoys the status of a national church as a result of various historical factors⁴⁶. In Bulgaria, the Church played a vital role in national homogenization even before the emergence of Bulgaria as a state. For this reason the establishment of the exarchate in 1870 was the first great victory for Bulgarian

⁴⁵ Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), pp. 141-142

⁴⁶ Pantelis Kalaitzidis, «Church and State in the Orthodox World. From the Byzantine “Symphonia” and Nationalized Orthodoxy, to the Need of Witnessing the Word of God in a Pluralistic Society» in *Religioni, Libertà, Potere Atti del Convegno Internazionale Filosofico-Teologico Sulla Libertà Religiosa*, (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2014), pp. 42-43.

nationalism⁴⁷. However, even today the Bulgarian Church functions as a very conservative factor in the Bulgarian society, supporting nationalism and the so-called traditional values⁴⁸. Such patterns are discernible in other Orthodox countries such as Romania and Serbia.

Nevertheless the most imperialistic and dangerous legend, which became an ideology nowadays is centered in Russia. For a long time, Russia had had a very strong nationalist and sometimes xenophobic tradition. Russia's nationalism was developed as a reaction against external threats, a country that was always in a state of war with Tatar-Mongols, Teuton knights and then Poland inevitably manifested a strong and assertive nationalism because of its geopolitical isolation and lack of allies. This nationalist ideology took the form of a religious concept, the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome, which emerged in medieval Russia:

The Church of the Old Rome fell because of the infidelity of the Apollinarian heresy. The Second Rome—The Church of Constantinople—was hewn down by the axes of the sons of Hagar. And now this Third Rome of thy mighty kingdom—the holy catholic and apostolic Church—will illumine the whole universe like the sun...Know and accept, O pious Tsar, that all the Christian kingdoms have come together into thine own, that two Romes have fallen, and that

⁴⁷ L.S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans Since 1453*, (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1958), pp. 371-375. For a more recent perspective on this event: Dimitrios Stamatopoulos, "The Bulgarian Schism Revisited", in *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, vol. 24/25 (2008/2009), pp. 105-125.

⁴⁸ Daniela Kalkandjieva, "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church: Authoring New Visions About the Orthodox Church's Role in Contemporary Bulgarian Society", in *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe: Nationalism, Conservativism and Intolerance*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet, (Cham Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 53-83.

a third stands, while a fourth there shall not be: thy Christian kingdom shall fall to no other⁴⁹.

In order to understand this concept, we have to put it into the appropriate framework. Monk Philotheus did not want to create a political agenda. For him, Rome was the original seat of the Orthodox faith, the Rome of the apostles, since Rome was the first Christian capital according to Christian tradition. Then the second Rome-Constantinople was the holder of the faith that had been inherited from Rome, which had become heretical. The collapse of Second Rome-Constantinople was political, a divine punishment for the corruption of the Orthodox faith⁵⁰. Russia, which had maintained its national independence, inherited the Orthodox faith and became its only center⁵¹.

Of course this story is just a fabrication, a religious legend, which nonetheless has grave political implications. The idea of equating Rome, Constantinople and Moscow could imply a grand plan of expansion, a new empire that is based on Orthodox Christianity.

This legend manifested and led the geopolitical strategy of Russia through the centuries. During the 19th c. it was accompanied by Pan-Slavism in order to extend Russia's influence to Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Leading protagonists of this movement were Count Nikolai Ignatev, General Rostislav Fadeev and Danilevsky. Fadeev's *Opinion on the Eastern Question* (1869) advocated a pan-Slav federation under Russian leadership, established by Russian force, using Orthodoxy as a propaganda

⁴⁹ Quoted from M. B. Petrovich, *The Emergence of Russian Panslavism 1856-1870*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956). See also: Dimitri Strémoukhoff, "Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of the Doctrine", *Speculum* Vol. 28 (1953), pp. 84-101.

⁵⁰ Mikhail Agursk, *The Third Rome: National Bolshevism in the USSR*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), p. 6.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.

tool⁵². The pan-Slavists supported an official Russian intervention against Turkey that finally on 12 April 1877 led Russia to declare war on Turkey. One of the consequences of this war was the establishment of the Bulgarian State, that would be active as a Russian pawn in the Balkans, giving Russians access to the Mediterranean and virtual control of Southeast Europe. It is interesting that even today there are views such as this: “The Treaty of San Stefano proves that Russia’s stance on the “Eastern Question was not dictated by profit, but by Christian morals, not by “divide et impera” principle, but by the aspiration to render assistance to fraternal Orthodox Slavic nations in the establishment of independent political regimes in the Balkans⁵³”. Actually the Treaty of San Stefano had as a political aim the establishment of a principality that would be merely a Russian outpost, which would give Russia access to the Aegean and control over Constantinople. Apart from this the statement that Russia wanted to “render assistance to fraternal Orthodox Slavic nations” is absolutely wrong, because such a treaty was against the political interests of the Serbs who found it distasteful⁵⁴. It is evident that an ideology (Pan-Slavism) and a religious dogma (Orthodoxy) played a major role as a justification of the Russian Empire to declare war against the Ottoman Empire.

The truth is that in modern times as well, the legend of Third Rome serves as a political-religious concept that gives leverage to Russian imperialism. Of course there are diverse interpretations of this concept, but most of them are used to reinforce the

⁵² Peter J. S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Evolution, Communism and after*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 33.

⁵³ Anna N. Klimenko and Vladimir I. Yurtaev, “The “Moscow as the Third Rome” Concept: Its Nature and Interpretations since the 19th to Early 21st Centuries”, *Geopolítica Revista de estudios sobre espacio y poder*, (2018), p. 241.

⁵⁴ L. S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans Since 1453*, pp. 407-410.

importance of the empire, to present Russia as the only obstacle for the Antichrist to overcome. Especially in Dugin's interpretation the Third Rome is perceived as the eschatological destiny of Russia, which by its very nature is imperialist and has been chosen by God to lead other nations. Such ideas can serve as a political justification for Russia's intervention to neighbouring countries, as we have seen in the recent war against Ukraine and as a tool for corrupting the true essence of Orthodox Christianity, which does not promote political aspirations in any way but instead strives for faith in God, love and unity between human beings⁵⁵.

The infiltration of such legends and stories into Orthodox Christianity shows the need for the creation of a modern Orthodox Theology free of ideas that lead to nationalism by exalting traditionalism and polarizing East and West⁵⁶. In order to accomplish it the theological faculties must stop to serve as the handmaidens of the national Churches and construct a new curriculum of theological studies based on the ecumenical character of Christianity. This kind of curriculum must be based on (1) concentration on biblical studies and critical evaluation of their findings (2) the relationship between today's natural sciences and theology (3) the knowledge of other Christian traditions and other religions (4) a scientific-critical approach to the history of Christianity and the modern challenges that has to overcome. Of course this does not mean that we are going to neglect the tradition and the Church Fathers, on the contrary, we are going to follow the example of the Church Fathers, who used

⁵⁵ Jardar Østbø, *The New Third Rome: Readings of a Russian Nationalist Myth*, (Stuttgart: ibidem pres 2016). This book contains diverse interpretations about the concept of Third Rome.

⁵⁶ Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "From the "Return to the Fathers" to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology", *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54:1 (2010), p. 15.

the science and philosophy of their era to open new ways for the Christian Theology of their era. Consequently we have to create our own stories and interpret in a new way the older ones in order to stand up to the challenges of modernity.

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