

--

February 1, 2019

CP World History

Mrs. Pool

"To what extent was Constantine's conversion to Christianity a political and cultural turning point in world history?"

During the reign of the Roman Empire, many of the people within placed their faith in their pagan gods. Many of those who chose not to conform to the emperor and the Roman Pantheon were rather treated differently. Many Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians, and especially Christians lived outside of the influence of the pagan Romans, but within the borders of Rome, these religious peoples were treated inferior to the so called superior Roman pantheon. Emperor after emperor, many Christians, Jews, and any other peoples of different religious faiths who lived in the walls of the empire were being struck with less and less tolerance and with more punishment as time went on. But one emperor who went by the name of Constantine the Great changed this system to allow Catholics to prosper within the empire. Although it was a social turning point to a moderate extent, Constantine's conversion to Christianity was a major political and cultural turning point in world history because it allowed Christianity to spread and flourish throughout the Roman Empire, and it allowed for the creation of a second capital and a second successful empire.

The Roman Empire is considered to be one of the most extraordinary empire for its time in world history. But what is considered to be the least extraordinary part about it was how Christians and other religious peoples were treated by the Roman government and its citizens. When many preachers have travelled to Rome to teach the Roman citizens the teachings of Jesus, they were often ignored. Many of them were also persecuted by the Roman citizens for their unwillingness to submit to the emperor and their Roman pantheon. By the year 300 C.E., ten percent of those who lived within the Roman empire called themselves "Christian" (Stock). Diocletian had a goal to restore ancient Roman faith and to unify the remaining native, pagan Romans, but found it difficult to do so, for he recognized that the size of the empire was simply too large to maintain control over. So he divided the Roman Empire into two with Maximian as a

co-emperor. He also found that the prevalence of Christianity in the empire is interfering with his goal. He then began the period known as the Great Persecution, which led to the burning of churches, torture, and murder of thousands of Christians and their leaders. But this all backfired for there was no resistance from the Christians, for they could never be removed from the empire (Stock).

In 312 C.E. Constantine was in a battle against Maxentius at the Tiber River. According to legend, "Constantine looked up into the sky to see a blazing cross of light with an inscription that read, "in hoc signo vinces" (in this sign you shall conquer)...he ordered his troops to inscribe the monogram of Christ on their shields. When the two armies clashed the next day, Constantine's army won a decisive victory (Stock)." It was at this moment when Constantine started to put his own faith into Christianity. He then put the Edict of Milan into effect, which allowed all religions within the empire to be practiced freely and end decades of unlawful persecution (Galerius and Constantine). Constantine then reunited the eastern and western empire and made the second capital, Nova Roma, or Constantinople. He then converted to Christianity when he was dying, thus making him the first Christian Roman Emperor. Although Constantine's conversion to Christianity was a major social and political turning point, it was a religious turning point to a moderate extent because it established Christianity as a tolerable religion throughout Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. When the Roman Empire was falling apart over time, the new, established city of Constantinople was a city where Christians could flourish as a people of a new-founded empire, the Byzantine Empire. Even Constantine's intent was to make Constantinople a "great Christian city", unlike the Romans pagan predecessors (Moulton). This was important because it gave Christians a name for themselves as an empire, and not as a discriminated people for their belief in the Christian

faith. But religion will only turn out to be proven to be a moderate turning point because all of the fighting between the Pagan Romans and Christians are not fighting to establish a religion. But when viewing this issue from a higher plane, it is seen that this is a fight for social control over a controlled section of land so that they can make their total influence over the people all the more impactful.

When Constantine and Galerius issued the Edict of Milan, Christianity thence became a respected religious view in the empire. The Roman Empire at this time was starting to fall apart for internal corruption, Germanic invasions, and the lack of pagan influence, for the native Roman citizens were losing their foothold socially and politically in the empire. Because of this, there was a lot less resistance against establishing foreign religions within the crippling empire. Therefore, many pagan Romans converted to Christianity, increasing the number of Christian churches and peoples. This was a big deal because when the Roman Empire was divided into two by Diocletian, the eastern half was prosperous, for it was where Christians would travel there to establish an empire for Greek Catholicism, allowing them to practice their religion freely without being inside the religious borders of another country's walls. These causes and events are the reasons that the Byzantine Empire was established. The western half, however, had much influence from the fall of the empire. Yes, they have been introduced to Germanic tribes and foreign religion, but their only government and social structure was what the Roman Empire left for them, this led to the construction of countries in the European mainland. So the influence of Christianity within the walls of the Roman Empire has led to destruction of what was once considered a great empire. But at the same time, allowed millions of what was once pagan Romans to convert to the Christian faith. This was also another cultural turning point in world history, for this was when Christianity became much more prominent and prevalent, thence,

leading to its popularity amongst everyone of all classes, even in leadership positions and peasant classes.

The Byzantine Empire, also known as the Eastern Roman Empire, was the only surviving part of Rome. The only difference was that the original Roman core values were lost in the western half. Many would hope that it would, "facilitate unity amongst all Christendom across Europe." (World History in Context). Although some may say that it did by uniting Christians that were and living in the eastern half of what we knew as the Roman Empire. There is also another side that would say that it didn't completely have any total power or influence over an extended amount of time, the diversity within the Byzantine Empire started to make Christianity have less of an influence and have them value their core values as Christians just as much as when Christians settled within the Roman Empire (World History in Context). But nonetheless, Constantine's opening of Constantinople allowed a place for Christianity to have a place and an identity for all of its followers and the people they have yet to have an influence on. It was home to, "a population of nearly one million people, several imperial palaces, and a vast system of roads, shops, and public spaces." (Pendergast). This shows the impact from Constantine's conversion and creation of Constantinople by showing that the original preachers who travelled to Rome to introduce people to Catholicism didn't have to travel far and wide for foreigners to convert, but rather can establish a home for all Christians from the Middle East. What made such a city and empire so successful was its unification of a single, central, and unifying religion, commercial and material transport, and its astonishing defenses. With transport, Constantinople has control of the straits leading into the Mediterranean and Black sea (Dagron). When it comes to their defenses, the Theodosian walls were strong enough to shelter millions, yet shield the city from hundreds of attacks coming from the Turkish empires (Dagron). And as mentioned

previously, the population of Constantinople has reached into the millions. The control of the straits near the Mediterranean and Black Seas lead to a huge import of valuable goods, making the economy rich and all the more prosperous. The Theodosian walls allowed the city to maintain its land for hundreds of years, even under the relentless attacks of the Turkish armies. And finally, the population of Christian peoples allowed there to be little to no social and civil unrest. All of that together, is what Constantine left behind when he formed Constantinople by converting to Christianity.

Although it was a moderate social turning point, because of how it allowed Christianity to flourish throughout the Roman Empire and to create a successful capital of a second successful empire, Constantine's conversion to Christianity was a major social and political turning point in world history. Socially, it allowed for Christianity to flourish through a strictly pagan society and become a dominant religious force in the Roman Empire. Politically, it was the foundation for a second stable capital that was home to millions that then led to the stability of the Byzantine Empire through importation and defense. But overall, it showed that his conversion into the faith of Christianity allowed Constantine to place a permanent tolerance towards Christianity and to end all injustices towards people of any religious faith. It also gave him the will to make a capital city where the preservation of Christianity will prosper as both a people and a great empire.

Works Cited

- "The Byzantine Empire." *Fashion, Costume, and Culture : Clothing, Headwear, Body Decorations, and Footwear Through the Ages* , edited by Sara Pendergast, et al., 2nd ed., vol. 2: Early Cultures Across the Globe, UXL, 2013, pp. 245-249. *World History in Context*,
<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX2760000049/WHIC?u=eng188921&sid=WHIC&xid=b5dc7e2e>. Accessed 31 Jan. 2019.
- "Christianity." *Ancient Greece and Rome : An Encyclopedia for Students* , edited by Carroll Moulton, vol. 1, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1998, pp. 122-124. *World History in Context* ,
<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX2897200091/WHIC?u=eng188921&sid=WHIC&xid=96a667f1>. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.
- "Constantine Legalizes Christianity: 313." *Global Events : Milestone Events Throughout History*, edited by Jennifer Stock, vol. 4: Europe, Gale, 2014. *World History in Context* ,
<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/GCLLPK060868887/WHIC?u=eng188921&sid=WHIC&xid=3a16fb6f>. Accessed 14 Jan. 2019.
- Dagron, Gilbert. "Constantinople." *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* , edited by Joseph R. Strayer, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989. *World History in Context*,
<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/BT2353200735/WHIC?u=eng188921&sid=WHIC&xid=61f64702>. Accessed 31 Jan. 2019.

"Galerius and Constantine: Edicts of Toleration (311/313)." *Gale World History in Context* ,
Gale, 2018. *World History in Context*,
<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/HASWLU814916790/WHIC?u=eng188921&sid=WHIC&xid=cec2944c>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2019.

"History of the Byzantine Church." *Historic World Events* , Gale, 2017. *World History in Context*,
<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/BT2359070817/WHIC?u=eng188921&sid=WHIC&xid=f8e76f9f>. Accessed 17 Jan. 2019.

Volz, Carl A. and III, Charles L. Kammer. "Conversion of Constantine to Christianity." *Great Events from History: The Ancient World, Prehistory-476 c.e.* , edited by Mark W. Chavalas, Salem, 2004. *Salem Online* .