



ISSN NO. 2320-5407

Journal homepage: <http://www.journalijar.com>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF ADVANCED RESEARCH

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Recognition of the Christian Religion in the Byzantine Empire, 4th century A.D

Salah L-A Mohammed¹, Kamaruzaman Yusoff^{2*}, Mansoureh Ebrahimi², Azlizan Mat Enh¹

1.School of History, Politics and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia (UKM)

2.Faculty of Islamic Civilization, Technology University of Malaysia (UTM)

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History:

Received: 18 June 2014
Final Accepted: 17 July 2014
Published Online: August 2014

Key words:

Pagans, Christians, Byzantine Empire, Diocletian, Constantine I the Great, Romanian Empire

*Corresponding Author

Salah L-A Mohammed

Abstract

This article attempts to detail out in order to analyse the recognition of the Christian religion of the Byzantine Empire at the beginning of the fourth century A.D. In particular, this paper clarifies the impact of the sectarian conflicts between pagans and Christians in the Empire, especially during the reign of the emperor Diocletian and the emperor Constantine I the Great who recognized the Christianity as official religion. The methodology used in this study is significantly narrative approaches of primary sources namely manuscripts, historical records and related documents. From this study, it is concluded that the tolerance policy of the Romanian Empire used with Christians at their first days did not last for long; soon after, that policy was converted to persecutions against Christians. Also, it is highlighted that the victory of Christianity was achieved in the era of Constantine the great, and that was not only professing and confessing Christianity's right to be existing, but also placing it under protection of the Byzantine Empire.

Copy Right, IJAR, 2014,. All rights reserved

Introduction

In the third century, the relation between the Roman Empire and Church got a new shape which it had not known before as what the Christianity reached of power and weight. That made the Romanian authorities very worried. The Christians became an organized power. They stood against violence and refused joining in the Romanian army, and none could have anything to do with its followers except Allah and the Holy Book. In fact, at that time, persecuting Christians and harming them was happening for the favour of the Romanian Empire only.

Clearly in the attitude of the emperor Septimius Severus (193-211 A.D) towards the Christians, he did not antagonize them at first, but their numbers increased. He hit the ceiling and banned baptizing them. In Egypt, he filled prison with them, whipped some of them, and dropped others to wild animals in the court of Carthage. Then, the emperor Decius (249-251 A.D) continued the same way of his previous counterpart, Severus, in harming Christians, even he took more violent actions against them. For instance, he imposed on all citizens for making offerings and vows and thanking signs to heathenism. Besides, he got a certificate regarding this which he presented to Romanian authorities when it was necessary. In any case, if anyone did not present that certificate, was considered as a Christian. The ordinance that he enacted towards siring apostates among Christians, particularly in creating troubles for the Church, succeeded regarding admitting apostates. Some of those weak-willed presented false certificates to the Romanian authorities while others got certificates through fraud. Soon, antagonizing of the government increased. Hence, in 257 A.D, the emperor Publius LiciniusValerianus ordered to confiscate possession of the Church, exile its men, and execute some of the brave bishops who stood against his orders. (Charles, 1961)

CHRISTIANITY IN THE REIGN OF EMPEROR DIOCLETIAN

After a very short period, Valerian was caught captive at the hands of Persians in 260 A.D. Then, his son, Galerius was crowned, and became the emperor instead of his father. Astonishingly, he did not lead the same way of his father. He initiated not persecuting Christians and stopping attacking them. Instead, he ordered to give them back what was confiscated from them and allowed them to build churches and buy and own real states. Since then, the church lived in peace and safety lasted for fortieth years in which Christians got their freedom to practice their religion and rites. Along all those years, the Church witnessed the development and flourishing movements that it did not go through before. This had its own effect on increasing the number of those who followed that religion, and also, on spreading Christianity more and more in the aristocratic class. (Gibbon, n.d, Jones, 1975)

After a period of prosperity and relative calm that accompanied the Pax Roman period, which lasted two centuries of the Roman Empire, there have been difficult times filled with turmoil lasted for nearly a century. In this critical period from the date of the Empire, the emperors styled cut off by the whims of the soldiers. This problem can be traced to the weakness of the system to inherit the throne of the Empire, meaning the absence of a fixed system or a clear mandate of the Covenant. The attacks increased from barbaric Germanic tribes and Persians on the border. Those tribes managed to penetrate the borders of defence, and flowed within the Empire. There were poor conditions of religious as well as the influence and the spread of Christianity in the Roman society at the expense of the official religion of the Empire, a pagan. Immediately, to boost the expansion of the Empire, the parties made it difficult for the central government to closely monitor the conditions of their respective territories. Consequently, that was applied everywhere in the Roman system. It was the destiny of the Empire to suffer from these dangers and problems of internal and external, until a man appeared to have the courage and strength of will that enabled him to save it. That man was Aurelius Valerius Diocletian (284-305 A.D). (Gibbon, n.d)

What Christians suffered from at the hands of Romanian government, no researcher might neglect the excesses and crimes the emperor Diocletian committed against Christianity. (Vryonis, 1967) As soon as he became the emperor in 284 A.D, he was worried about the power of Christians and their religion's followers' leaving worshipping the emperor. (Vasiliev, 1952) This threatened the Empire and its safety. The emperor, thus, decided to fight their religion and harm them. His move was based on fear that neglecting the Christianity religion might result in ruining the edifice of the Romanian society. Among his executives, there were enemies of Christianity. Despise to Christianity, the most enemies was Galerius who was nicknamed Caesar. Galerius exaggerated to the emperor Diocletian how the Christians were dangerous for the Empire, and encouraged him to use his powers in order to return the Romanian Gods back to their old position. Fears of the emperor increased when he discovered that among his own organized generals and chiefs, soldiers and officers were followers of the religion. (Downey, 1969) Of what assured the emperor's fears, he incensed and aroused his grudge to those external dangers that represented in the gothic Persians. (Yusoff et. al, 2012) It was happened especially when Christianity reached and entered Persia, and it was illustrated that Manichaeism (Bernia, 1979) had a very close relation with Christianity.

Diocletian could not see Christians in a separated group from the body of the Empire, a group that did not give it to him. Soon, he ordered to degrade their ranks in the army and to discharge them from the army. Also, he started firing them from civil positions except if they made offerings to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the traditional guardian of Rome. (Rustum, 1955) After that, a Nicene ordinance was enacted on October 23, 303 A.D which it was encompassed strong actions. According to that, all churches were closed and ruined after confiscating their properties. Besides, all Holy Books were collected and burnt, meetings of Christians were banned, and religion men were arrested and jailed. (Rustum, 1955)

However, those who resisted the orders of Diocletian, were tortured violently, and sentenced by execution. It was also the same for any Christian who held meetings or practiced worship. He deprived them from the protection of the law which made them call the last period of his era "martyrs era". (Jones, 1975) As a result, on one hand, it was the big number of martyrs, and the other hand, it was due to the strong persecution of Christianity followers. In fact, it was memorable that the Coptic Church in Egypt and Ethiopia was still dating those events of the era of Diocletian or the martyr's era. (Bel, 1968) The Coptic valuation started on August 29, 284 A.D when it was the same day in Thoth month, the beginning of the ancient Egyptian year and the reminiscence of the martyrdom of several Christians. Despite the violent actions taken by Diocletian against Christians, they did not weaken. Instead, they cheapened death for their religion, and proved their bravery, patience, heroism, and sacrifice. It brought them blessing to be admired and supported by those who were in their era. Accordingly, many people embraced Christianity. (Bernia, 1979)

RECOGNITION OF THE EMPEROR CONSTANTINE I CHRISTIAN RELIGION

It was stated that Constantine the Great converted to the Christianity willingly, (Wright, 1987) enacted a decree-law called "Milan's Decree" in 313 A.D. which brought peace and prosperity back to the Christianity and its philosophy. (Löhr, 2010) Consequently, the Christianity became alike the heathenism in the era of Constantine the Great, after being illegal and unrecognized throughout the Empire, and after Constantine the Great found his capital, Constantinople, in the beginning of the 4th century A.D. The victory of Christianity was in fact, the rise of the history of the Byzantine Empire during the era of Constantine I the Great. (306-337 A.D) In 305 A.D. Diocletian was ill and got elderly. Then, he and Maximian quitted their imperial titles and resigned their political careers. Then Galerius became the emperor of the Eastern side of the Empire instead of Diocletian while Constantius, the father of Constantine I, became the emperor of the Western side of the Empire instead of Maximian. Constantius was famous for his peaceful attitudes towards Christians. However he died in 306 A.D in Britain headquarter, then his son Constantine succeeded him. (al-Nasiri, 1975) In 311 A.D, Galerius was ill severely, and it was thought that it was revenge of Christians' God against him. So, he all of a sudden enacted an ordinance in which he banned persecuting Christians and forgave them, and declared their right to live honourably. It seems that ordinance was not actually carried out. (Vasiliev, 1952)

In that year, 311 A.D, while Diocletian was still alive (as he died in 312 A.D), broke out a civil war and the rebels declared dethroning Galerius and assigning Maxentius, the son of Maximian, instead. (Fisher, 1917) Constantine I exploited the death of Maximian and Galerius, so he allied with the new Augustine Licinianus. Afterwards, both were able to defeat Maxentius in a decisive battle occurred at Milvian Bridge on the Tiber river near Rome. Besides, Maxentius was drowned in the Tiber River where he was trying to escape the battle. (Eusebius, 1965) The rise of Constantine the Great to the imperial throne as the following placed Constantius Chlorus wife, Helena and Constantine in her city of Nis in the territory of Dacia and has retained his childhood last days of his life by his own power and silence, thanks to his commitments of chastity and restraint. When he was eighteen, his father Constantius elevated to the position of Caesar. As we mentioned earlier, the son did not join his father when he went to the office in Britain, but preferred to stay in the service of the emperor Diocletian. (Oman, 1914) Subscribed to Constantine I in a war fought against the Empire of Egypt and Persia, and was promoted to commander in chief in the army Dux was a sincere and loving to his job, works tirelessly. He loved the army and the people loved him until he became a name in the list of candidates for the position of the Caesar. The waiver of Diocletian in 305 A.D lifted Galerius for the position of the emperor, according to the regulations established by Diocletian before.

When Constantine I became the emperor of the Byzantine Empire, Christianity was spread and prevailed in the Empire three centuries ago. Some emperors tried to ruin and finish Christianity using violence and execution such as Diocletian and Galerius. Galleries was a very cruel severe person for Christians. However his cruelty led to nothing, and Christianity spread more and more than before. Followed by, after years of persecution, he himself found that violence policy was a wrong policy. Finally, he was convinced that violence and tyranny could not destroy a whole people and its religious beliefs. (Runciman, 1959) This may be the result of disease that attacked him for a very short period. Therefore, he enacted willingly not to reform what he ruined, a general ordinance by the name of his and Licinianus. In that ordinance he said:

"Our will is going to expand the advantages of our kindness and mercy for those misery Christians. So, we allow them to express their own opinions freely, and to hold secret meetings without fear or disturbance, on one condition, they always respect the laws and the existing state." (Davis, 1968)

It seems that Galerius men did not publish that ordinance, but they just published instructions to governors of states telling them about the emperor's kindness to Christians and asked them to stop judging Christians and ignoring secret meetings of Christians. Soon after, those Christians who were arrested were released. Unfortunately, this did not last for long due to the short period of Galerius govern (305-306 A.D), and due to the following disorders and unsettlements inside the Empire. Next, Constantine the Great and Licinianus gathered at the city of Milan in March, 313 A.D, and declared their forgiveness and tolerance towards Christians. It follows that, he issued a document which was claimed to be wrong because of the original text of the document was not found by the name of Milan's document. That document was an ordinance, but it was a message directed to one of the state governors in Asia Minor and the east in general (the governor of Nicomedia). It is contained directions to deal well with Christians and illustrated the tolerance and forgiveness policy the Empire followed towards them. (Vasiliev, 1952) This document was received as a one of the general laws of the Roman Empire. The following is on that document,

"So, we decided to enact an ordinance that insures for Christians and all other denominations the freedom to choose their religion. This way, we ensure that all Gods and supernal powers are satisfied with us; in addition, we ensure that all of our subjects are satisfied. So, we decided firmly and mindfully not to deprive any of our subjects whoever he is from choosing Christianity as his religion." (Vasiliev, 1952)

The text of the last of paragraph as it was in English is as following:

"So that the form of this ordinance and of our benevolence may come to the attention of all men. It will be convenient for you to promulgate these letters everywhere and bring them to the knowledge of all, so that ordinance of our benevolence may not be hidden." (Oman, 1914)

Therefore we are looking at the following facts:

1. Christianity was secret movement since its beginning till the Decree of Milan in 313 A.D.
2. Some emperors persecuted Christians and some of them exceeded in that.
3. Milan's Decree was the only of its type regarding tolerance with Christians, but preceded it an ordinance by the names of Galerius and Licinianus.
4. Galerius ordinance was not working due to the short period that Galerius ruled.
5. Maybe there is some evidence in the last sentence which proves that, besides, the statement "not to be hidden" refers to fear of a pervious deed which is included in this statement and its meaning and it feared to be repeated.
6. Milan's Decree was not enacted by Constantine I alone, but it was enacted by him and his partner in govern, Licinianus. (Davis, 1968)

In fact, the letter issued by Constantine and Licinianus was an emphasis of what was reported in Galerius ordinance in 311 A.D. This message gave Christians and others following other religions the full freedom to follow the religion they wish to. Thus, Christianity became an admitted and professed religion like many other religions in the Empire. The continuation of Milan's ordinance returned back all religious rights to Christians who were deprived from which wrongly. In addition, it stated that all possession of the Church, all their worshipping places and public confiscated land for no claim and for no charge must be given back to them. This fierce threat was accompanied by a promise to those who bought possession of the Church and paid much money for them, to be paid a big compensation from the treasury of the Empire. (Ashour& Rabie, 1971)

It is worth notice that the victory of Christianity was achieved in the era of Constantine I the Great; it was not only a confession of its right to exist, but also putting it under the protection of the Empire. This was significant in the early Christianity history. (Vasiliev, 1952) Christianity rose three centuries before Constantine I, and even in the era of Constantine I, its followers were few at the Mediterranean Sea. Hence, the victory of Christianity, especially over other Eastern religions, is mainly attributed to enthusiasm and preference of the Empire to it. Likewise, Zoroastrianism (Rabie, 2000) when Sassanid Persian rulers stood by it, and considered it the religion of the state, as a result, it spread widely. (Vryonis, 1967)

Scholars argued about the real motives behind Constantine I, the profession of Christianity, the Church historian Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea in Palestine who was a friend of the emperor Constantine (Eusebius, 1926), thinks that the emperor's motives are religious motives God's will wished. Also, there was a story attributed (may be wrong), to Eusebius that Constantine I told him that he saw, in 312 A.D, soon before Milvian Bridge battle against the opponent Maxentius, a lightening cross in the sun surrounding horizons at sunset written on it "with this you will triumph in this." Then, he saw the Christ in the following night in a dream holding the same sign and telling him to advance to the battle holding the Cross. (Nicholson, 2000) At the day-break, Constantine I told the story to his companions. It was said also that the Cross was painted on the shields of his soldiers. So, when he started the battle at Milvian Bridge which gave him the chance to lead the West, thus, he thought the God of Christians gave him a hand and supported him against hi opponent Licinius. (Vasiliev, 1952)

It was said that Constantine's impression of Christianity was referred to the role his mother, Helena who embraced Christianity, and was considered a saint (Helena the saint). Helena was born in Asia Minor and got married to Constantius I or she was his mistress. She had Constantine I in 274 A.D, next, he, Constantius, abandoned her for political reasons in 289 or 292 A.D. It seems that Helena played an important role in Constantine's profession of Christianity. She worked to ennoble her throughout the Empire in 313 A.D, too. In particular, she visited al-Quds or Jerusalem and gave presents generously and contributed to building many churches. Also, it was said that during her visit to Jerusalem, she discovered the Cross-board. None of concurrent historians mentioned anything about the role of Helena in finding the Cross board. As well, some historians outweighed that she died before finding it. (Obeid, 1970)

However, Constantine's profession of Christianity did not mean only giving it a legitimate rights like those existing Heathenish religions, but also it meant enhancing its constituents and paving the way to its prosperity. The emperor Constantine I granted Christian religion men the same rights and concessions of Heathenish religion men. They were exempted from taxes and taking up civil positions as to give them the chance to do their religious duties. Churches got more wealth due to presents, money, donations, lands, possessions that were given to them from the

Empire. Moreover, Christians were exempted from attending Heathenish celebrations. It was also said that Constantine I ordered to build many churches all over the Empire such as the Church of Paul the saint in Rome and the Church of ascension on olives mount, and lastly, the Church of Bethlehem. (Armstrong, 1967) For that reason, he adorned his new capital Constantinople and its neighbourhood such as those churches next to it, the Church of messengers and others. Also, in his era many churches were established in other places like Antioch, Nicomedia and North Africa. (Rabie, 2000)

It is worth mentioning that the emperor Constantine I the Great after his profession of Christianity as one of the religions professed in the Empire, he saw that the unity and survival of the Empire both depend on the unity of the church. He used the power and greatness of the Empire to stop the conflict which began to rise among religion men at that time. The disposal of Roman emperor Constantine I did not "Pontifex Maximus," but a Byzantine emperor and the Pope in that one "Byzantine Caesaropapism." This can be evidenced through the emperor Constantine I when in 325 A.D, in Nicaea city, he held the first religious worldwide council that religious men could discuss the dogma and the Church affairs. He was the first to invite to that council, invited the bishops to Nicaea. He was also the chairman of council's sessions, and imposed on bishops the theology decisions. He, thus, preferred to leave clear impacts on the relations between the Church and the Empire in the East. This means that the Byzantine Emperor became the master of the Church and the commander of its affairs; hence, he had a great impact in the history of the Eastern Church. (Hussey, 1955)

The co-operation between the Church and the Empire which was started by Constantine I led to many problems. Since that time, the Byzantine Empire became obliged as a party in each of the Church conflicts and disputes. Therefore religious disputes between sects were not anymore of the church's responsibility only, but also affected by political conditions of the Empire. (Obeid, 1970) It was known that since Julius Caesar (he was killed in 44 B.C), (Geanakoplos, 1965) some Roman emperors tried to move their capital to the East. For instance, Julius thought to make Alexandria or Trojan in Asia Minor as his capital. Also, it was mentioned before that Diocletian made his headquarters in Nicomedia in Asia Minor where he was the ruler on the East side of the Empire. (Vasiliev, 1952) Undoubtedly, moving the political headquarters of the Empire from the West to the East, from Rome to the new Constantinople was an incident of importance as the East was richer in its economical sources and more populated forms the West. Moving the capital to the East was as getting rid of many war problems which faced the Empire in the West especially at the Danube River where the attacks of the Gothic Berbers were so fierce. (Yusoff et. al, 2012) Also, it was important to stop the Sassanid Persian danger which became stronger and violent at that time. Thus, the Empire had to restore all regions that were belonging to the ancient Persian Empire. (Ostrogorsky, 1956)

CONCLUSION

The tolerance policy of the Roman Empire used with the Christians at their initial days did not last for long; soon, that policy was converted to persecutions against Christians. As this issue did not mean much to the Empire as long as it did not contrast the general policy of the Empire, it can be said that the Rome did not persecute Christians due to their religion. However, the Empire kept for itself the right to interfere onto or take any violent actions against any religions that represented danger for the general system and public manners. Accordingly, the Roman Empire converted its policy towards Christians when they refused, the same as Jews, to sanctify and to worship the emperors, and to incense in front of their godlike figures in order to prove their loyalty to the Empire. The victory of Christianity and its right was achieved in the era of Constantine the great under protection of the Byzantine Empire.

REFERENCES

- Al-Nasiri, S. A. (1975). *Tarikh al-Imbraturiya al-Romaniya al-Siyasiwa-al-Hadhari*. Al-Qāhira: Dar al-Nahdha al-Arabiya.
- Armstrong, G. T. (1967). Constantine's Churches. *Gesta*, 6, 1-9. doi: 10.2307/766661.
- Ashour, S., & Rabie, H. (1971). *Fifty Documents in Medieval History*. Cairo: n.p.
- Bel, E. (1968). *Mesr Min al-Eskender al-Akbar Hata al-Fateh al-Arabi (Dirasa Fi Intishar al-Hadhara al-hiliniyawa-Idmihlaliha)*. Translated by Ali, A. A. Al-Qāhira: Maktabat al-Nahdha al-Misriyah.
- Bernia, H. (1979). *Tarikh Iran al-Qadim Min al-BidayaHtaNihayat al-Ahd al-Sasani*. Translated by Al-Munem, M. A. & Muhammad, A.-S. Al-Qāhira: Dar al-Kutob al-Mesriyah.

- Charles, M. P. (1961). *The Roman Empire. Britain*: n.p.
- Davis, R. (1968). *History of Medieval Europe from Constantine to Saint Louis*. London: n.p.
- Downey, G. (1969). *The Late Roman Empire*. U.S.A.: n.p.
- Eusebius. (1926). *The Ecclesiastical History, an Introduction*. London: n.p.
- Eusebius. (1965). *The history of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Translated by Willimason, G. A. Middlesex: n.p.
- Fisher, D. W. (1917). War and the Christian Religion. *International Journal of Ethics*, 28(1), 94-108. doi: 10.2307/2377511.
- Geanakoplos, D. J. (1965). Church and State in the Byzantine Empire: A Reconsideration of the Problem of Caesaropapism. *Church History*, 34(4), 381-403. doi: 10.2307/3163118.
- Gibbon, E. n.d. *The Decline and fall the Roman Empire*. Vol. 2 & 3. New York: Penguin Books.
- Hussey, J. M. (1955). *The Byzantine World*. 3rd ed. London: n.p.
- Jones, A. H. (1975). *The Decline of the Ancient World*. London: n.p.
- Löhr, W. (2010). Christianity as Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives of an Ancient Intellectual Project. *Vigiliae Christianae*, 64(2), 160-188. doi: 10.2307/20700362
- Nicholson, O. (2000). Constantine's Vision of the Cross. *Vigiliae Christianae*, 54(3), 309-323. doi: 10.2307/1584644.
- Obeid, I. (1970). "QissatUthur al-Qudisa Helena AlaKhashabat al-SalibUstura Am Waqi?" *Al-Majella al-Tarikihiya al-Mesriya*, 17.
- Oman, C. W. (1914). *The Byzantine Empire*. London: n.p.
- Ostrogorsky, M. (1956). *History of the Byzantine State*. Translated by Hussey, J. Oxford: n.p.
- Rabie, H. M. (2000). *Dirasat fi Tarikh al-Dawla al-Bizantiya*. Al-Qāhirah: Dar al-Nahdha al-Arabiya.
- Runciman, S. (1959). *Byzantine Civilization*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Rustum, A. (1955). *Al-Rūm Fi Siyasatihimwa-Hadaratihimwa-Dinihimwa-Thaqafatihimwa-Silatihim Bi al-Arab*. Vol. 1. Al-Qāhirah: Dar al-Kutob al-Mesriyah.
- Vasiliev, A. A. (1952). *A History of the Byzantine Empire 324-1453 C.E*. Vol. I. Wisconsin: n.p.
- Vryonis, S. J. (1967). *Byzantium and Europe*. London: Harcourt, Brace and Co.
- Wright, D. H. (1987). The True Face of Constantine the Great. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 41, 493-507. doi: 10.2307/1291584.
- Yusoff, K., Mohammed, S. L. A., Ebrahimi, M., & Enh, A. M. (2012). The Barbarians and fall of the Romanian Empire in the West in 476 AD. *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences*, 6(8), 1537-1551.