

Weekly Lecture 6: Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (ca. 300-1000)

In this lecture, I will begin talking about one of the most fascinating periods in Western Civilization, the Middle Ages. So first, what are the Middle Ages? Ever since the Renaissance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which we will study later in the term, the Middle Ages have been defined as the period between the collapse of the Roman Empire in Western Europe (that is around 476) and the modern period, which for them was about 1350 or so, but most modern historians end it at around 1500 CE, not long before the Protestant Reformation. Thus, the Middle Ages is just a generic title for the period between the ancient world and the modern world. However, this thousand years of Western history is not so easily summed up with the title of the Middle Ages. The aforementioned Renaissance thinkers, having just passed through the Black Death, or the Bubonic Plague, and dealing with the political chaos of Italy of their time dismissed the preceding period as a time of cultural decline. Their goal was to restore ancient culture and knowledge, thus unfairly dismissing the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages, even though the Middle Ages gave birth to many intellectual and cultural developments that have influenced the modern world, and it was certainly not a period of unremitting ignorance.

Indeed, in my very biased opinion as a historian of the Middle Ages, medieval Western European Christians, as well as Byzantine Christians and Muslims, far surpassed Romans and Greeks in many areas, including art and architecture. Really, what is more impressive the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris or the Colosseum in Rome? The Church of Hagia Sophia in modern Istanbul, or the Parthenon in Athens? The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, or the Pantheon in Rome? Granted it's a matter of opinion, but the ancient and medieval buildings are at least as equally impressive. As we will see, there were many examples of cultural vitality in medieval life, not only in Western Europe, but also in the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic World, one

instance being the great planned city of Baghdad, once the greatest city in the Western World under the Abbasid Dynasty.

This time period known as the Middle Ages for good or bad was also far from static. The Middle Ages is often divided into three periods: first the early Middle Ages from about 500 to 1000 saw the end of the Roman Empire in the West, the rise of Islam, and the transformation of the classical world; second, the High Middle Ages from about 1000 to 1300 saw the greatest years of cultural blossoming in Western Europe and growing interconnections between all regions of the Greater West and between the Greater West and the rest of the Eurasia and Africa. The Late Middle Ages from about 1300 to 1500 saw the vital culture of the Renaissance as well as famine, plague, religious enthusiasm, and renewed economic vitality. In the end, one can say of the Middle Ages that what didn't kill the medieval West made it stronger. This lecture will especially focus on the Early Middle Ages, while other lectures will deal with the High Middle Ages, the Later Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. To understand how medieval civilization came about, we first have to understand how the Roman Empire and Christianity, which was soon to become the predominate religion in the Roman world, were transformed in the period known as late antiquity between about 300 and about 600, which saw the legalization of Christianity and the end of the Western Roman Empire

Part 1: The Aftermath of the Conversion of Constantine

If you remember from before the midterm, ever since the establishment of the Roman Empire under Octavian Augustus in the first century BCE, succession to the imperial throne was often so contentious that it led to civil wars, and as the empire expanded, the Roman army gained more power, so that by the early third century, the army was the primary body that proclaimed emperors and deposed emperors, and they usually proclaimed one of their own, regardless of his

social class or ethnic origins. One of the results of this was the so called third-century crisis, which witnessed 22 legitimate emperors of whom only two died a natural death; the others were assassinated. There were also approximately 50 other pretenders to the throne who were likewise murdered. As a result, the enemies of the empire, both the Sassanid Persians in the east and the barbarian tribes in the north invaded parts of the empire. Though such threats were eventually contained, to end the crisis the empire needed strong and decisive leadership.

In 284, after the emperor was struck by lightning in Persia and his son and successor was murdered, Diocletian, a minor general who probably was responsible for the murder of his predecessor, had himself proclaimed emperor. Upon his ascension to the imperial title, Diocletian could easily have become just another usurper, but the emperor wisely recognized that he could not be in multiple places at one time. What he needed were colleagues, rather than rivals, in other parts of the empire to provide peace and stability. This he hoped would prevent renewed civil war between emperors proclaimed by the army in various provinces. So in 286, he appointed the Illyrian peasant Maximian as Caesar or junior emperor in the west, and then in 293, he expanded the power sharing by promoting Maximian to be Augustus in the west with Constantius as his Caesar, and he appointed Galerius to be his Caesar in the east. Through various marriages, they tied each other together, and Diocletian envisioned that upon the death or retirement of an Augustus, his Caesar would succeed him. Historians have called this system the tetrarchy, because though Diocletian divided the empire into four regions, it remained one empire with Diocletian as the senior emperor. Diocletian also established his capital at Nicomedia in present-Turkey, rather than at Rome. This was not because Rome was unimportant, but because Diocletian wanted to be near to the heavily populated regions of Greece and Asia Minor for the sake of taxes and close enough to the border with the Persian

Empire quickly to lead any army in defense of the Roman borders. Likewise, the western emperors under Diocletian established their imperial headquarters near the imperial borders for the same reason. Diocletian instituted other reforms besides the tetrarchy, such as the reorganization of provinces, a tax system based on payment in kind, the expansion of the army, and the division between civilian and military administrations. But he is most famous for instituting the last Roman persecution of Christians.

One day in 298 when Diocletian and his priests were sacrificing bulls in Diocletian's eastern capital of Nicomedia, the soothsayers repeatedly failed to find the usual markers for the omens on the livers. Eventually the soothsayers declared the problem was that a Christian who was there had crossed himself to defend himself against demons. At this point, Diocletian commanded all members of his court to sacrifice to the gods or face a flogging and dismissal from service, but he did not call for their execution. Five-years later, however, Diocletian and his Caesar Galerius decreed the destruction of all Christian churches and books, and the following year ordered all inhabitants of the empire to sacrifice to the gods on the pain of death. The persecution was not entirely as widespread as Diocletian wanted it to be, because while it hit the Christians of the east, North Africa, and parts of Italy hard, in much of the western empire, under the Caesar Constantius, it was barely implemented. The motivation behind this persecution was to root out the Christians for causing the third-century crisis by causing the gods to withdraw their blessing from the empire.

But this persecution was ultimately unpopular and unsuccessful. Because the relative absence of persecution in the second half of the third century had allowed people to get to know the Christians better, and even though they still disliked their stubborn refusal to worship the gods, many Romans no longer thought them worthy of being fed to wild animals. When

Diocletian abruptly resigned in 305 to tend to his cabbage garden and forced the Western Augustus Maximian to do so as well, the new Eastern Augustus Galerius continued the persecutions. But even before Constantine's conversion in 312, persecution had already virtually stopped in the eastern empire. Galerius, suffering from painful intestinal cancer, issued an Edict of Toleration in 311, hoping to appease the Christian God who he believed was punishing him for killing the Christians.

In the western part of the empire, there were much more pressing issues, since Diocletian's plan for the succession broke down within a year of his abdication as emperor. This is not surprising, since powerful and ambitious rulers often dislike sharing power. A year after Diocletian and Maximian resigned, and their Caesars succeeded them, the Western Augustus Constantius died at York in the province of Britain. Although Constantius' Caesar Severus was supposed to succeed Constantius upon his death, the Roman army in Britain proclaimed Constantius' son, Constantine, the new Augustus. This event inevitably led to civil war since Severus was not about to renounce his claim, and then Maxentius, the son of the retired Western Augustus Maximian, laid claim to the title of Augustus as well, and then to add to the confusion Maximian himself came out of retirement. Then after Maxentius captured and executed Severus, the eastern Augustus, Galerius, appointed a man named Licinius as yet another Augustus in 308. There were now four Augusti in the empire, and three of them were in the West.

However, in 312, everything changed at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. In October, Constantine and Maxentius engaged in a battle at the Milvian Bridge, which crosses the Tiber River near Rome. The victory that day belonged to Constantine whose army defeated that of the Maxentius who in turned died by drowning in the Tiber. Constantine's victory that day was not inevitable, and many writers in the fourth century attributed his triumph to divine intervention.

When the Roman senate dedicated a triumphal arch to Constantine after his victory, they included this inscription: “To the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine, the Greatest, *Pius, Felix, Augustus*: inspired by (a) divinity, in the greatness of his mind, he used his army to save the state by the just force of arms.” A contemporary panegyric by a Roman pagan claimed that an army of gods assisted Constantine in his crushing of Maxentius. Others, however, provided a different explanation for what god inspired Constantine. According to Lactantius (d. 325), a Christian writer who later became one of Constantine’s advisors, the emperor had a dream the night before the battle in which Jesus Christ instructed him to place the Chi-Rho, the first two letters of the word Christ in Greek, on his soldiers’ shields. Alternatively, another of Constantine’s advisors and a Christian bishop, Eusebius of Caesarea, claimed in his *Life of Constantine* that the day before the battle, “[Constantine] saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS.”

After Constantine defeated Maxentius in the west, his only other rival in west, Licinius, seized the eastern part of the empire from Galerius’ successor. Seeing no point of continuing the conflict, the two Augusti divided the empire between themselves: Constantine took the West, and Licinius took the East. In 313 they jointly issued the Edict of Milan in which they affirmed Licinius’ decree of toleration, granted freedom of religion to all, and restored property to the Christians. The peace, however, did not last. Claiming that Licinius had renewed the persecution of Christians in the eastern empire, Constantine invaded the east and defeated Licinius at the Battle of Chrysopolis in 324 in Asia Minor. Constantine was now the sole Roman Emperor and the patron of Christianity.

Initially, Constantine did not seem to understand Christianity that well. In the early years of his reign before he seized the eastern half of the empire, Constantine adhered to a syncretistic

blend of Christianity and his father's favorite cult of *Sol Invictus*, or the Unconquerable Sun, whose image Constantine placed on his coins. Despite this, Constantine did much to promote the interest of the catholic churches, allowing bishops to hear civil suits, legalizing monetary bequests to churches, repealing disabilities on married persons who were childless due to celibacy, prohibited branding criminals on the face with the rationale that they were formed in the image of God, funding the construction of new churches in Rome and elsewhere, and banning pagan animal sacrifices. Yet, he also permitted a temple to be built in his name in Africa, and though he ordered law courts and workshops to be closed on Sundays, he did so probably to honor the Venerable Day of the Sun, rather than the Lord's Day.

What was Constantine's motivation for converting to Christianity? It is impossible of course for us to know the heart and mind of Constantine, but it seems the case that Constantine hoped to gain from the Christian God what the Romans had long sought to gain from their pantheon of gods, prosperity, victory, and peace. Instead of seeking the peace of the gods, Constantine sought the peace of God. But we should not exclude authentic religious belief, since as a Roman Constantine would not have separated religion and political motivations. Indeed, in the midst of a civil war, Constantine took a big risk in throwing his support behind Christianity. Patronizing what many saw as an obnoxious and anti-social cult could have backfired.

Indeed, it almost did backfire, because despite his assumption that Christianity was a unified network of churches, he discovered that there was a diversity of Christian churches and that even within Catholic Christianity, which he favored alone, he soon realized that even Catholic Christians did not agree on everything. After Constantine's conquest of the east, he was made aware of intractable disputes among the Christians in the eastern provinces. The bishop of Alexandria had condemned one of his priests, Arius, for arguing: "There was a time when the

Son [of God] was not." Arius argued that while Christ was divine, he was not divine in the same sense as God the Father was, that is, he was not co-eternal with God the Father. Instead, the Father had created him as his instrument of creation, making Christ the first-fruit of creation. Thus, the cosmological hierarchy went God, the Son, and then Creation. As the Being through which creation was brought into existence and as the halfway between God and creation, Christ alone was the mediator between God and man. Others, however, insisted: "The Father always, the Son always," concerned that Arius implied that Christ was just like the rest of humanity.

When Constantine failed to convince the religious belligerents to abandon what the emperor saw as an insignificant debate, he summoned a council at the city of Nicaea in present-day Turkey. Though it isn't clear whose idea the council was, Constantine wanted the assembled bishops to settle the issue once and for all. Since the major issues at hand were primarily eastern conflicts, only a few bishops came from the west, and the elderly bishop of Rome, Sylvester, sent a few delegates to keep an eye on the proceedings within the great hall of the imperial palace. The bishops ultimately, though sometimes reluctantly, agreed to a formulation (known as the Nicene Creed) stating that Jesus is God and consubstantial, that is, of the same divine substance, with God the Father. In other words, though they were distinct persons, they shared the same divine substance. Most of the bishops, even those who worried about whether the wording of the creed was biblical, ultimately agreed to the council's creed, since they could interpret it in a slightly different way, and the emperor wanted them to come to a consensus. But Arius and a few of his supporters refused to accept the creed, and for their steadfastness to Arius' formulation, they and their intellectual heirs were labeled by their enemies as Arians.

But the controversy hardly ended there. For the next sixty or so years, controversy about the relationship between Christ and God the Father would rage across the eastern half of the

empire. By the end of his life, Constantine himself began to support the Arian position because he found those who supported the Nicene formulation to be too rigid and dogmatic, since he wanted concord above all. After Constantine's death, one of his sons and ultimately the sole emperor, Constantius II, continued his father's policy, opposing the Nicene faction and supporting the Arian faction. The controversy did not end until Emperor Theodosius I (r. 379-395) in 381 called a council to revise the Nicene Creed, defining the Trinity as three persons (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) in one substance. Though the emperor's strong support of the formulation ended the debate for the most part in the east, an Arian bishop from the east converted many of the Germanic peoples on the border of the empire to Arian Christianity and, thus, these peoples would later bring Arianism back into the empire, though into the western half, in the fifth century.

In addition, before the controversy was settled, pro-Nicene bishops helped to formulate a much clearer understanding of Christianity. In opposition to others they considered heretics, they formulated the current list of 27 New Testament books, and they declared that not only was the canon of Scriptures closed, but also that no new revelations were possible, and thus any divine communication a Christian received must be in line with the New Testament canon and the authority of the catholic hierarchy. Thus, what once had been a network of churches was being transformed into a unified church with a common creed, a common set of scriptures, and a common hierarchy of bishops. Though other theological controversies over the nature of Christ would continue, other challenges facing the Roman Empire in the fifth century would do even more to transform both the empire and Christianity.