

UPRISING NOTES FROM JULY 14, 2002

Facilitator: Martin Nieto

Note taker: Joe Miller

Martin began the session with a summary of the previous week's discussion concerning the "Christianization" of the Roman Empire. How did Christianity become the official state religion after being a target for persecution for so many years? Two "official" views are (1) it was a product of divine intervention (the orthodox view), or (2) it was due to massive conversions from paganism. Jim H. argues that, in fact, it was the result of the Romanization of Christians. Christians adapted themselves and their movement to influence the elites in Roman society. [See Uprising Notes for 7/7/02]

Jim then picked up the discussion of Constantine, who had defeated all his rivals by 323CE. Constantine saw himself as a liberator and unifier of the empire. In 324CE, two letters were sent to Bishops and Provincial Governors, which announced Constantine's imperial policy with Christianity as the chosen state religion. Jim reviewed the central points in these letters, which included, among other things:

- all exiled Christians were called back to Rome
- they were to be released from prison
- property was to be restored or awarded to next relative
- any failure to restore property would be punished
- Imperial funds would be used to restore destroyed properties
- no pagan idols would be tolerated
- all criticism of Christianity forbidden
- books critical of Christianity were to be burned

Constantine closed these letters with the announcement that Christianity was now to be the official religion and he was to be its Vicar.

Constantine called the Bishops to Nicea in February of 325ce in order to resolve a controversy, what Gonzalez refers to as the "Arian controversy" (Chapter 17). Jim expressed the fundamental question in this way: how to communicate Jewish monotheism into Greco-Roman thought while protecting biblical faith in baptism and trinity?

The Jewish tradition held that truth was revealed in concrete actuality and communicated through stories. The Christian Apologists were Platonist and neo-Platonist and their task was to find a way to translate a Jewish Movement into Platonism.

The basic debate was reflected in the positions taken by two individuals, Arius and Athanasius. According to Arius, Jesus and God were “of like substance,” in Jim’s words.

Athanasius, on the other hand, held the position that Jesus and God were “of the same substance.” The historian of the Nicene Council, Eusebius, was the first speaker at the Council, and he used the Athanasian terms in his version of the creed. Since this was the first position to be heard by Constantine, he accepted this as doctrine and condemned Arius and the Arians. Constantine then exiled Arius.

Jim posed the question: Does this then solve the fundamental problem? He is not convinced that it does, though it has become the basis of Trinitarian theology. It seemed to solve the question for the Apologists, the elite in society of that time.

What were the responses of other sectors of society?

- (a) PAGANS: approximately 50 million; great losses to this group
- loss of government employment
 - loss of lands
 - closing of temples

Two options: cooperate or actually convert to Christianity

Jim mentioned the book CHRISTIANITY AND PAGANISM IN THE FOURTH TO EIGHTH CENTURIES by Ramsay MacMullen, for further information on this.

(b) THOSE WHO RECALLED THEIR PERSECUTION:

Confessors: those arrested and tortured to force a renunciation of their faith

Martyrs: those tortured and killed as punishment for maintaining their faith

Two general responses:

- Monastic movement moved to alternative communities in deserts
- established monasteries; referred to as “desert ancestors”
 - important in agricultural development
 - 448ce the “Sayings of the Fathers” appears with three themes: humility, self-control, and vigilance

Cappadocian Fathers---often quoted Origen (see Gonzales for more)

- confrontational toward Constantine
- killed or exiled

According to Jim, all the above were effective carriers of Christianity's left wing, maintaining it through the ages.

Finally,

(c) JEWISH COMMUNITY:

- rise of Constantine and Christianity confirmed their worst fears
- felt they needed to separate themselves in order to preserve traditions
- saw their lives now in the hands of gentiles
- the Nicene Council must be viewed as the birth of "Western" civilization.

22 May 337ce: Constantine passed away.

410ce: Rome is sacked and pillaged by the Visigoths, signaling the end of the Western Roman Empire. This does not end Christendom, however, as the capital had been moved to Constantinople.

Alaric, the Visigoth leader, wished to settle people inside the Roman Empire. These were apparently Arian Christians, thus anti-Nicean.

The story up to 800ce, when Charlemagne establishes the Holy Roman Empire, then becomes one of how orthodox Christians might fend off the barbarians and the anti Niceans.

DISCUSSION: After Jim's presentation, the discussion revolved around a few issues.

First of all, he was asked to clarify some points concerning the debate between Arius and Athanasius. While Eusebius' use of terms solidified the creed, it probably would not have made any real difference which words were used.

How is it that 5% of the population can have so much influence? How did Constantine view this situation?

Jim reviewed Constantine's conversion vision, the fact that he was born in Britain and had early dealings with varieties of Christians, and that he "needed money" for his imperial vision.

Jim also reviewed the different notions of monotheism that were reflected among the various sectors of the population at that time.

Finally, in response to a question about why the monastic movement chose to take themselves into exile in the desert, Jim reminded everyone that this movement was focused on the historical Jesus. They were the authors of the "minority report" in these early years of the rise of Christianity.