

HENRY CHADWICK

The Early Church



PENGUIN BOOKS

go beyond destroying some churches; no one was executed. When he died at York on 25 July 306 the soldiers proclaimed his son Constantine as emperor. Constantine, like his father, worshipped the Unconquered Sun; but there was Christian influence in his household since he had a half-sister named Anastasia (*anastasis* = resurrection). At the crisis of his career in the war of 312 to gain sole power in the West, Constantine invoked the mighty aid of the Christian God and was not disappointed. His rise to power in 306 made it certain that persecution would not affect provinces under his control.

In the East where Christians were far more numerous, the story was quite different. Diocletian wanted to avoid bloodshed; but in 304 he retired from public life, emerging in 305 only to announce his abdication and permanent retirement to Split in Dalmatia, and Galerius' now unrestrained fanaticism, abetted by his Caesar Maximin Daia, produced a minor blood-bath. The intensity of Galerius' feeling is shown by the edict he issued on 30 April 311 when he was dying in great pain. He explains that he had tried to persuade the Christians to return to the religion of their forefathers, but 'very many persisted in their determination,' and he now grants them toleration and the right of assembly in return for which they are begged to pray for his health and for the defence of the State. Galerius' death did not end the troubles. In 312 inspired pagan petitions poured in to Maximin Daia asking him to suppress the 'novelty' of the disloyal Christians.¹ But Maximin soon fell in civil war against Licinius and out of the welter of war and intrigue in 311-12 two figures emerged as supreme, Constantine in the West and Licinius in the East. In February 313 at Milan they agreed on a policy of religious freedom for all, Christians and pagans alike, and on the restoration of all property, whether belonging to individual Christians or to churches as corporations.

The worst legacy of the persecution was once again schism. As in modern times the Christians differed among themselves about the point at which resistance to the State must

1. See the inscription from Arycanda in Lycia (found in 1892), translated in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 297.

be absolute. In the East sacrifice was regarded as apostasy, not the surrender of sacred books and church plate. But in the West opinion was divided, passion ran high, and in consequence, although persecution was briefer and left most western provinces unaffected, the scars were more serious than in the East. Mensurius, bishop of Carthage, cooperated with the authorities in holding no public worship; though he gave up no sacred books, he was able to satisfy the friendly police with heretical volumes. His policy was to lie quiet until the storm passed over. Likewise bishop Marcellinus of Rome surrendered the sacred books. But in Numidia especially, the surrender of the scriptures or indeed of any books which the police were ready to accept as such (one bishop handed in medical treatises) was regarded as apostasy. To think otherwise was to derogate from the glory of those who had died rather than surrender, since it implied that they had been overdoing it. Mensurius found himself the target of bitter criticism. He regarded those who refused any co-operation with the police as merely provocative; his archdeacon Caecilian actually picketed the local prison to prevent food being taken to the 'confessors' there who were denouncing their bishop and all his works. This deep division led to the fanatical Donatist schism when Mensurius died and Caecilian was hastily consecrated his successor by three country bishops, one of whom was generally believed to have surrendered the scriptures to the police. This consecration raised anew Cyprian's question whether one who (by apostasy or schism) had lost the Spirit could confer the Spirit's gifts. The Numidian bishops proceeded to consecrate another bishop of Carthage, one Majorinus, of the household of a difficult lady named Lucilla who had a long-standing feud with Caecilian. Before the persecution she had made a practice of producing, during the commemoration of the departed at the eucharist, the bone of a martyr not recognized by the ecclesiastical authorities; she lavished kisses on it so ostentatiously that she was rebuked by archdeacon Caecilian. The resulting enmity between Lucilla and Caecilian shows how the genuine issues of principle on which the schism took its rise were bedevilled by private resentments.

As bishop of Carthage Caecilian was only able to survive because of the powerful support of Constantine and because he enjoyed ecclesiastical communion with Rome and the churches north of the Mediterranean, granted in 313 on condition that Caecilian abandoned the Cypriatic sacramental theology. Donatus (Majorinus' successor) appealed. This was referred by Constantine to a Council at Arles (1 August 314), which he constituted a court of appeal for reviewing the Roman decision. The bishops at Arles naturally upheld the previous findings. Thenceforth the Donatists became increasingly intransigent, determined to keep the purity of the church unstained by any communion with the compromised and compromising Catholics. The schism completely dominated African church life for the next century, and survived until both Donatist and Catholic were swept away by Islam (below, p. 225).

In Egypt there was also schism: the issue turned not on the surrender of books but on the possibility of submission to the edict forbidding meetings for worship. Bishop Peter of Alexandria fled the country; when the metropolitan of the Thebaid, Melitius of Lycopolis, arrived at Alexandria he was scandalized by this absence of worship and pastoral care, and proceeded to ordain two (one perhaps the future heresiarch Arius) to look after the Alexandrian church. Peter's hasty return and Melitius' arrest averted a crisis, and the schism, though long-lived, never became large; but it was serious enough to demand the attention of the Council of Nicaea and to cause acute embarrassment to Athanasius when he became bishop of Alexandria in 328 (below, p. 134). Arius himself very soon left the Melitians and was reconciled to Peter's successors, becoming a trusted and popular presbyter at Alexandria with an immense following both among the young women and among the dockers for whom he wrote theological sea-shanties. Not until about 318-20 were there signs that Arius' orthodoxy was highly questionable. He could not believe that the incarnate Son was one with the transcendent First Cause of creation. 'The Son who is tempted, suffers, and dies, however exalted he may be, is not to be equal to the immutable Father beyond pain and death: if he is other than the Father, he is inferior.'

8

Constantine and the Council of Nicaea

THE conversion of Constantine marks a turning-point in the history of the Church and of Europe. It meant much more than the end of persecution. The sovereign autocrat was inevitably and immediately involved in the development of the church, and conversely the Church became more and more implicated in high political decisions. It is characteristic that the Western attitude towards the conversion of Constantine and its consequences has generally been more ambivalent than the Eastern. In the West there has been a sharper consciousness of the double-sidedness of his benefits to the Church. But if his conversion should not be interpreted as an inward experience of grace, neither was it a cynical act of Machiavellian cunning. It was a military matter. His comprehension of Christian doctrine was never very clear, but he was sure that victory in battle lay in the gift of the God of the Christians. In 312 with inferior forces and against all prudence he made a rapid invasion of Italy and attacked his rival Maxentius in Rome. Instead of remaining secure behind Aurelian's walls, Maxentius chose to come out and fight with the Tiber behind him. It was such unaccountable folly that Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge (312) seemed a signal manifestation of celestial favour. The Roman senate erected in his honour the Arch that stands today by the Colosseum, depicting the drowning of Maxentius' troops and proclaiming in its inscription that Constantine won 'by the prompting of the deity'. The deity to whom they referred was the Unconquered Sun.

The Christians believed the one God whom they worshipped had given Constantine victory. Lactantius, the

Latin apologist who taught rhetoric at Nicomedia in Asia Minor, tells of a dream granted to Constantine directing him to put the 'Chi-Rho' monogram on his shields and standards as a talisman of victory. The sign, which appears on Constantine's coins from 315, was a monogram of the name of Christ. Late fourth-century writers called it the 'labarum'. Its name and shape might suggest an echo of the double-axe (*labrys*) which was an ancient cult-symbol of Zeus. But that its meaning was universally understood to be Christian is shown by the fact that under Julian it was abolished. Perhaps Constantine decided to make the Christian monogram his military standard even prior to 312. Before a battle against invading barbarians (he told Eusebius of Caesarea many years later) he had seen the cross athwart the midday sun inscribed with the words 'By this conquer'. The occasion may have been during his campaign against the Franks near Autun in 311; a contemporary pagan orator mentions a vision of the Sun-god on the eve of his victory on this occasion.

In other words, Constantine was not aware of any mutual exclusiveness between Christianity and his faith in the Unconquered Sun. The transition from solar monotheism (the most popular form of contemporary paganism) to Christianity was not difficult. In Old Testament prophecy Christ was entitled 'the sun of righteousness'. Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 200) speaks of Christ driving his chariot across the sky like the Sun-god. A tomb mosaic recently found at Rome, probably made early in the fourth century, depicts Christ as the Sun-god mounting the heavens with his chariot. Tertullian says that many pagans imagined the Christians worshipped the sun because they met on Sundays and prayed towards the East. Moreover, early in the fourth century there begins in the West (where first and by whom is not known) the celebration of 25 December, the birthday of the Sun-god at the winter solstice, as the date for the nativity of Christ. How easy it was for Christianity and solar religion to become entangled at the popular level is strikingly illustrated by a mid-fifth century sermon of Pope Leo the Great, rebuking his over-cautious flock for paying reverence to the

Sun on the steps of St Peter's before turning their back on it to worship inside the westward-facing basilica.¹

If Constantine's coins long continued to be engraved with the symbolic representation of the Sun, his letters from 313 onwards leave no doubt that he regarded himself as a Christian whose imperial duty it was to keep a united Church. He was not baptized until he lay dying in 337, but this implies no doubt about his Christian belief. It was common at this time (and continued so until about A.D. 400) to postpone baptism to the end of one's life, especially if one's duty as an official included torture and execution of criminals. Part of the reason for postponement lay in the seriousness with which the responsibilities of baptism were taken. Constantine favoured Christianity among the many religions of his subjects, but did not make it the official or 'established' religion of the empire.

When in obedience to a divinely granted dream he decided to found a new capital for the eastern half of the empire at the magnificent strategic site of Byzantium on the Bosphorus, he intended it to be a 'New Rome', providing it with two noble churches dedicated to the Apostles and to Peace (Irene).² But he also placed in the forum a statue of the Sun-god bearing his own features, and even found room for a statue of the mother-goddess Cybele.³ The 'genius' of the city he solemnly invoked with a celebration conducted by Christian clergy on 11 May 330.

Constantine's benefactions to the Church were on a large scale. The ravages of persecution he made good by financing

1. Conversely, under Julian some found it easy to revert from Christianity to solar monotheism. The bishop of Troy apostatized without fear for his integrity because even as a bishop he had secretly continued to pray to the sun.

2. Both churches were rebuilt under Justinian in the sixth century. The church of the Apostles was destroyed by the Turks in the fifteenth century, but Justinian's church of Irene remains, adorned with splendid (iconoclast) decoration. The old church of St Sophia (of Christ the divine Wisdom) was built not by Constantine but by his son Constantius (below, p. 143); this church perished by fire in the Nika riot of 15 January 532, leaving the ground free for Justinian's masterpiece.

3. She was represented, however, in an attitude of prayer which provoked pagan wrath.