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THE EDICT OF MILAN AND THE EARLY ROOTS OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE ROMAN
EMPIRE

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Humanities

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During the winter months of the year 313 CE, Emperor Constantine of the Roman Empire met in Milan with his rival emperor, Licinius, to reconsider the policies regarding the Christian population. Their agreement would be known by most as the Edict of Milan¹ — a continuation to the already existing Edict of Toleration declared by Galerius, the third living Roman Emperor, just two years prior. The main intentions behind the edict were to abolish practices that persecuted the Christians and to begin accepting their religion in Rome: “no man whatever should be refused complete toleration, who has given up his mind either to the cult of the Christians, or to the religion which he personally feels best suited to himself.”² The edict also declared the abolishment of “all conditions whatever which are embodied in former orders directed to your [the governors of the Roman provinces] offices about the Christians” and that “the places at which they were used formerly to assemble be restored to the Christians.”³ Throughout the course of the next century, the Christian religion would transition from being persecuted to being the official religion of the Roman Empire. As a result, some scholars argue that the Edict of Milan began the rise of the Christian religion because the edict preceded the legitimization of Christianity in the Roman Empire. However, this is not the case. The Edict of Milan did not cause the spread of the Christian religion, but rather, it was a response to an already growing movement.

¹ The most credible source of the Edict of Milan comes from the writings of Lactantius, a Christian apologist who lived during the years 250-325 CE.

² Lucius Lactantius et al., “The Edict of Milan” In *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*. 321-323, Translated by J. Stevenson. Revised by W. H. C Frend. Baker Academic (2013).

³ Ibid.

Roughly 50 years before the time of Constantine and Licinius, Emperor Diocletian, the predecessor to Constantine, despised the Christians. Diocletian wanted to restore Rome to the way Emperor Augustus ruled it with the traditional Pagan gods as the forefront of religion. Augustus' empire was so large that it stretched from Spain all the way to Egypt, but Diocletian recognized that he alone could not control it. He split the the land into the west and east half to deal with the growing problems like the increase of barbarian invasions, and he accepted a man named Valerius as his co-emperor to lead the western half of Rome. Diocletian himself would rule the east. Despite this, if he wanted to be recognized like Augustus, he needed to be enveloped in divinity, or at least convince the people of that. Augustus was viewed as a god sent from the heavens, and thus Diocletian had to be a god too. However, the Christians living in the Roman Empire stood in the way of this because they did not believe in any other gods besides their one God, and they especially did not believe that mankind could be divine. Because the Christians did not view Diocletian as divine, he could then justify using them as a scapegoat for everything undesirable happening to Rome: disease attacks, barbarian invasions, and general social disruptions.

To Diocletian, the Pagan gods were unhappy with Rome because the Christians were allowed to practice their religion. Diocletian used any excuse he could to burn their churches, stone them in the streets, and essentially persecute them into submission of his "divine" status. Most persecutions were declared in the form of edicts, some of which Eusebius of Caesarea, one of the first Christian historians, elaborates on. In his words, "an imperial letter was everywhere promulgated, ordering the razing of the churches to the ground the destruction by fire of the Scriptures, and proclaiming that those who held high positions would lose all civil rights, while

those in households, if they persisted in their profession of Christianity, would be deprived of their liberty.”⁴ To humiliate the Christians even further, Eusebius adds on in another edict that under Diocletian's rule, “all the people in a body should sacrifice and offer libations to idols.”⁵ This edict forced Christians to go against the very fundamental belief that there is only their one God, but Diocletian needed to impose this in order to maintain authority and be seen as divine. All the people had to submit to the emperor in order for the nation to be united.

Emperor Diocletian, however, was not divine; he was a human being doomed to eventually die. In the year 305 CE, he stepped down from the throne after becoming too sick to lead. He convinced Valerius to do the same and eventually died in 311 CE. The two thrones then went on to the next emperors in line: Galerius in eastern Rome, and Constantius in western Rome. But, the transition into new leadership did not come peacefully. For the next few years, those in any relation to previous emperorship struggled for the power of the throne. This continued until only three candidates remained: Galerius’ friend Licinius, Valerius’ son Maxentius, and Constantius’ son Constantine. The three would war with each other in order to eliminate the other candidates and guarantee the throne. In one historic battle between Constantine and Maxentius on the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE, Constantine's men slaughtered Maxentius’ until they pushed his forces to retreat back to Rome. Maxentius himself did not survive as he drowned in a river before reaching the city. However, in Eusebius’ perspective,

⁴ Pamphili Eusebius et al., “The First Edicts of Persecution” In *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*. 308, Translated by J. Stevenson. Revised by W. H. C Frend. Baker Academic (2013).

⁵ Lucius Lactantius et al., “The Fourth Edict” In *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*. 310, Translated by J. Stevenson. Revised by W. H. C Frend. Baker Academic (2013).

divine intervention also played a factor in the battle. Eusebius explains in his unfinished biography of Constantine, *The Life of Constantine*, that the night 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, *In hoc signo vincae*, Conquer by this sign . . . In his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens.”⁶ The next morning, Constantine instructed his men to replace the original symbols on their shields and banners with the symbol of Christ.⁷ If Constantine really was spoken to by the Christian God, then this battle most likely contributed to Constantine's future acceptance of Christianity. Afterwards, there were only two emperors left: Constantine and Licinius. Instead of pursuing war, the two declared a truce and met to begin developing the Edict of Milan.

Some of the lines in the Edict of Milan, however, suggest that the rise of Christianity already started and that the edict was not what began it. For example, one section states that “the places at which they were used formerly to assemble be restored to the Christians.”⁸ Lactantius used the words formerly restored because Christian's property was to be *restored* as if they had already established themselves in Rome. The Edict of Milan did not call for the establishment of Christian property but instead its reestablishment. In order to stay in power and continue to

⁶ Pamphili Eusebius . *Eusebius Pamphilius: Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine*. 582-583, 739-741, Translated by Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian

⁷ The Christian symbol is known as the Labarum. The Labarum is a combination of two Greek symbols, Chi (χ) and Rho (ρ) to form one symbol ($\chi\rho$)

⁸ Pamphili Eusebius et al., “The Edict of Milan” In *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*. 321-323, Translated by J. Stevenson. Revised by W. H. C Frend. Baker Academic (2013).

receive the support of the people, Constantine had to be generous to them. At the time, Constantine was not even a declared Christian; he was still a Pagan. Yet that did not stop him from promoting the Christianization of the empire. Constantine personally gave grants to build churches and he allowed Christians to be government officials when this had not been allowed to before. Roughly a year after the Edict of Milan was established, Licinius began attacking Christians and destroying their churches. Yet Constantine still defended them. He gathered his army and led an invasion into Licinius' territory until he had him hanged.

With this in mind, some historians argue that the Edict of Milan marked a significant shift in population favoring the Christians. Theological historian, David Knowles, explains this in his paper regarding the Christian church as a political entity: “with the conversion of Constantine there took place the most radical change that has ever occurred in Christendom . . . the church became a state church with the head of the state as its protector.”⁹ When Christianity became adopted as the official religion, the Roman Empire would never be the same. However, there are other factors that have led to the rise of Christianity, and one formal declaration of the large presence of Christianity is not the only factor. New Testament scholar, Helmut Koester, points out in his book, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, that the Apostle Paul played a huge role in spreading Christianity. Koester states that “although Paul’s missionary effort constituted but a small segment of the beginnings of Christianity, it became very important and had momentous consequences.”¹⁰ The apostle’s journey can be traced through his letters found in the

⁹ David Knowles. “Church and State in Christian History” In *Journal of Contemporary History*. 3-15. (1967).

¹⁰ Helmut Koester. *History and Literature of Early Christianity (2)*. 110, De Gruyter (2000).

book of Acts in the Bible. These memorandums leave records of his travels through historically significant cities like Jerusalem, Macedonia, Greece, and especially Rome. Everywhere he went, he built churches and started small Christian cults. More importantly, Paul preached about the life of Jesus Christ, the savior in the Christian religion, and how living a Christian lifestyle would lead to everlasting life in happiness in the Christian heaven. This was a message that would begin spreading long before the Edict of Milan.

That Christian lifestyle that Paul advocates involves charity and giving back to those that have less. Living with this moral conduct encouraged kindness among people and accentuated the importance of reaching the Christian heaven. This also meant treating each other equally regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity because all are equal in the eyes of the Christian God. Thus, Christianity often appealed more strongly to women. Religion sociologist, Rodney Stark, analyzes the differences between women's and men's support of Christianity during the religion's early roots. Christianity regarded women far differently than Paganism. Where Paganism discouraged giving birth to girls or children with irregularities, Christianity prohibited abortion and infanticide practices. A woman could love their child regardless of its sex or ability. Pagan families also forbade women from receiving an education, forced them to marry at puberty, and required them to live under the domination of their husband or man. Meanwhile, Christian women were under less drastic circumstances. Christian women were not pressured remarry if widowed — unlike the Pagan women. Christian women could, and often did, marry at an older age and had more choice in who they married. Christianity also encouraged women to remain chaste until marriage equally as much as men. “In all these ways,” Stark states, “the Christian women enjoyed far greater a marital security and equality than did her Pagan

neighbor.”¹¹ The promise of independence and the ability to make their own decisions without a man dictating them made Christianity an appealing religious lifestyle for women.

The Christian religion also helped spread hope when Paganism often failed in this aspect. During the year 250 CE when the Plague of Cyprian struck Rome, mass deaths were common in Roman population because of the spread of a disease still unknown to medical historians. It is proposed that the epidemic could have been smallpox or measles. Regardless, this left the Roman Empire prone to attacks from neighboring states, such as the Gaul and Germanic tribes. Ironically, even though emperors, like Diocletian himself, blamed the Christians for these events, Christianity as a whole strongly benefited from the plague and the invasions. Where Pagan gods failed to protect their followers, Christianity offered peace of mind by explaining that there is a purpose in everything and a prosperous future awaiting those who have faith in the Christian God. Because there were far fewer Christians compared to Romans, the population of Christians would remain a small percentage while the Roman population percentage would decrease dramatically. According to Rodney Stark, this meant that “large numbers of people, especially Pagans, would have lost the bounds that once might have restrained them from becoming Christians.”¹² As a result, there existed less societal pressure to be a Pagan and fewer constraints seeking hope from Christianity. The hope Christianity created offered a compelling alternative to Paganism for the suffering Romans. This in combination with the women in Rome becoming

¹¹ Rodney Stark. “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women” In *Sociology of Religion*. 229-244, Vol 56:3 (1995).

¹² Rodney Stark. “Epidemics, Networks, and the Rise of Christianity” In *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*. 73-95, Princeton University Press (1996).

increasingly Christian helped convince the men to become Christians as well. The Christian following was not just the men but the children as well because women are the ones who give birth and raise them. Eventually, the small cults of Christians started by Paul would grow to be a huge population of Romans to whom Constantine would have to respond and acknowledge.

The Christian population grew so large that the only way that Paganism could ever return was if the Christians were simply removed from the Empire or killed off. Roman history after Constantine's death in 337 CE would prove that no other methods would work when his nephew, Julian, became emperor. Julian attempted to revert the Roman Empire back to Paganism by proposing several edicts that targeted the Christians. This would in turn diminish the Christian presence in the empire. Several of Julian's propositions modeled edicts similar to those of Diocletian: most declared that Pagan temples were to be rebuilt and that Pagan practices should be adopted again. However, these changes did close to nothing in minimizing the strength of the Christian movement. The attempt to revive Paganism died along with Julian because the next emperor's — Theodosius — policies prohibited most Pagan practices. Sacrifices and visits to Pagan temples were banned and Christianity became established as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

But, the Edict of Milan was not what created such a large population of Christians to exist. Constantine's actions and the edict itself certainly helped them become a more prevalent political entity, but the edict's effects on Christianity's growth in followers fall short in comparison to the effects that the religion itself, the travels of Paul the Apostle, and the unique circumstances surrounding Rome had. None of these reasons are because of the Edict of Milan or Constantine's actions, but instead, they are a response to the presence of the Christians.

Afterwards, Christianity would become the backbone of centuries of history and politics in the Byzantine Empire, the Medieval Kingdoms, the Renaissance era, and all the way up to the Modern age.

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