

Milites in Christo:

*Constantine and Henry VIII's Shaping of Religious
Spheres*

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Separated by over 1200 years, Emperor Constantine and King Henry VIII ruled during times of important religious fluctuation which involved vital aspects of daily life and would have significant influence after their reigns. Land, leadership, wealth, and spectacles are vital areas of life through which change can be seen and simultaneously serve as the markers for comparison between the religious fluctuations of each period. It is these aspects which Constantine and Henry VIII were witness to and for Henry VIII specifically, facilitated a change in religion—something that would impact the rest of their respective eras as well as those to come. Both men set in motion irreversible changes for their own kingdoms and empire. Regardless of their personal religious beliefs, Constantine and Henry VIII ushered in and exacerbated religious changes during and after their reigns.

The way in which the Romans and English conceived of their world provides clarity as to why they believed what they did. Between 170 and 312 AD, the Roman Empire saw widespread anxiety in regards to religion.¹ During this period, the average man was satisfied with pagan beliefs, which explained the world around them without much incident.² As stated by Peter Brown, “Traditional belief in the activity of the gods in the universe presented a singularly unified and unbroken surface,”³. This mindset is similar to what the early-modern English, pre-Protestant Reformation, people thought. Almost all English men and women were Roman Catholics in this period and the consensus is that they believed “that God had created the universe, ordered it, and was active in its daily workings,”⁴. In relation to the Hobbesian idea of the ‘body politic’, the English conceived of their world as being ordered in a hierarchy known as

¹ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 50.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 51.

⁴ Bucholz, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History. Early Modern England 1485-1714*, 23.

the Great Chain of Being.⁵ In this view, everything was ordered in terms of the physical dwelling place of each entity. God was everywhere and so he was at the top, then the angels in the heavens, man on earth, animals on earth but closer to the ground, plants, then stones, etc.⁶ One of the ways that this was manifested for the English was on holidays or special events where there would be processions. These processions would be arranged in exactly the way the Great Chain of Being ordered people, the highest group at the front and the peasants bringing up the rear- a physical manifestation of where one stood in their community.⁷

The pre-Reformation Catholic Church in England was omnipresent in every activity of life. It is what marked the beginning of life, union of man and woman, death, and connection to the deceased through baptism, marriage, funerals, and prayer.⁸ With the Romans, Pagan rituals offered a similar solace. Throughout the Roman world, the old gods of the Greek world were present at traditional oracle-sites and ushered the people towards following the ancient rites associated with them.⁹ As with the English Catholics, if the Romans abandoned these rites they would bring forth “earthquakes, famine, or barbarian invasion”¹⁰ for the betrayal of the gods. Anything that disrupted the English’s worship of their Catholic God or the Romans’ worship of their Pagan gods, invited untold horrors into their society- worshipping was fueled by the fear of disaster in the case of noncompliance.

The crisis of the third century left people feeling deserted and in search of a new source of comfort.¹¹ At this time there was increased tension between Pagans and Christians as both

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 51.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 67.

sides noticed political, military, social, economic, cultural, and natural aspects to the crises happening around them and both groups blamed the other for these.¹² Regardless of how widespread the crisis actually was, the smaller crises happening here and there still took a toll on the people.¹³ Emperor Galerius approving of the Christian Church's legality through saying that their prayer was acceptable- as it was done for the safety of the state- opened the door for coexistence.¹⁴ The crisis of the third century ended in "agreement, coexistence, and cooperation between the Roman State and the Christian Church,"¹⁵.

The rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire was not an inevitable process fueled by gradual change but an unexpected yet impressive expansion stemming significantly from the crisis of the third century.¹⁶ Christian persecutions and measures against the Church in general should be taken into consideration. In the period of persecution from 299 to 305 AD, there were supposed imperial level persecutions happening- but the extent of these must be called into question.¹⁷ The four main sources for these imperial persecutions come from Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, Dionysus of Alexandria, the Acts of Pionius, and the *libelli* recording sacrifices from Emperor Decius' decree.¹⁸ What is important within this evidence is that the first three sources are Christian with only the forty-four *libelli* certificates from Egypt being Pagan.¹⁹ These certificates are recording the sacrifices ordered by Decius, however only one person per household needed to partake in a sacrifice.²⁰ Not only did this mean that not everyone in a

¹² Alföldy, "*Difficillima Tempora*: Urban Life, Inscriptions, and Mentality in Late Antique Rome".

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 111.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 65.

¹⁷ Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?".

¹⁸ Rives, "The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire".

¹⁹ Rives, "The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire".

²⁰ Ibid.

household was actively participating in a Pagan ritual, but one did not need to show additional evidence as proof of Paganism- resulting in ambiguity in the effectiveness of Decius' persecutions.²¹ Moreover, Decius' written decree is not recorded, leaving the brunt of evidence on the four surviving sources- each problematic in their own way.²²

While the Roman acceptance of Christianity was vaguely backed by the State and growing in the masses, the Protestant Reformation was driven by governmental instruction but could not have taken hold of England without the willingness of the populus. Where the Roman state was only somewhat explicit in toleration of Christians, Henry VIII and his government had to completely support Protestantism in order to maintain authority over the people. By at least 1527, Henry VIII sought counsel with the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church and from 1529 to 1532 Henry's position changed into an attack against the head of the Church.²³ In 1534 Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy which officially stated what Henry VIII had already been practicing for the past few years, he was "the only supreme head on earth of the Church of England,"²⁴. In addition to this Act, additional legislation gave power to Parliament over the prosecution of heretics and allowed the Crown to select the bishops.²⁵ To secure his authority, a Treason Act was also passed which made it illegal to speak against Henry VIII's succession and titles- new and old.²⁶ Henry would order the imprisonment of clergy, removal of shrines, and placement of the new English translation of the Bible into churches.²⁷ In 1536, Parliament passed

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Bucholz, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History. Early Modern England 1485-1714.*

²⁴ Ibid, 79.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Bucholz, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History. Early Modern England 1485-1714.*

²⁷ Ibid.

an Act Extinguishing the Authority of the Bishop of Rome, officially severing any last official ties to Rome.²⁸

Constantine's support for Christianity was not as legally documented as Henry VIII's was. In 313 AD, the Edict of Milan granted Christians the ability to worship, thus ushering in a newfound peace for them in the empire.²⁹ One of the ways Constantine could help solidify the Christian presence in Rome was through his building projects.³⁰ Prior to Constantine there had only been small private houses, called *tituli*, usually located on the fringes of populated quarters, where Roman Christians could gather.³¹ This would change with construction of Constantine's Lateran Basilica in 324.³² In addition to this being the first public space the Roman church had, it also received donations from the emperor.³³ Constantine also went forth to build St Peter's Basilica, which was situated on the site of St Peter's tomb on Vatican Hill, constructed from 319 to 322 AD.³⁴ St Peter's would also receive donations from the emperor. These two basilicas merged contemporary imperial architecture with Christianity as they mimicked civil basilicas but were utilized for Christian gatherings.³⁵ While the legislation records are few in number compared to those of Henry VIII's period, Constantine actively supported Christianity in an imperial sense through means that were sufficiently indirect to avoid major pushback from Pagans.

Just as Constantine erected public places of worship for the Roman Christians, Henry VIII had to reclaim the private Catholic lands from the Church for the Crown through the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Lançon, Bertrand, Trans. Antonia Nevill. *Rome in Late Antiquity: AD 313-604*.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Dissolution of the Monasteries and Convents of 1536-1539.³⁶ This was a religious and financial matter as it was accomplished under the guise of rampant corruption in the monasteries which served to increase the Crown's dwindling finances, a result of Henry's expensive foreign affairs.³⁷ At this point in time the monastic land amounted to around fifteen percent of the land in England and this could be sold as well as the books, artwork, and other goods within the monasteries themselves.³⁸ From this series of events, two staggering issues arose concerning who bought the land and what happened to those who benefited from these institutions.³⁹ The Protestants who purchased the once-Catholic land just became landed aristocrats, solidifying their support for Henry VIII as he just increased their status and eradicated much of the Catholic Church's wealth.⁴⁰ A lasting issue from the Dissolution is that Church-run institutions such as hospitals and schools were now gone and with them, the charity of Catholic faith as a whole.⁴¹ The lack of charity would haunt the Crown in the future, necessitating new legislation such as the Poor Law, creating government regulated welfare- for good or for worse.⁴²

Catholic charity is a main tenant of the faith and was present in Roman Christianity as well. While the Roman state did not require its aristocracy to preserve and restore buildings around the city, they did so anyways as a means to connect their old Pagan ways of patronage with the Christian value of charity and giving back to one's community.⁴³ It appears, through the aristocracy's epigraphic habit, that while there are inscriptions mentioning *difficillima temporae*, the aristocratic way of life was still continuing- as evident through the persistence of the

³⁶ Bucholz, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History. Early Modern England 1485-1714.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid*, 90.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Alföldy, "*Difficillima Tempora: Urban Life, Inscriptions, and Mentality in Late Antique Rome*".

epigraphic habit.⁴⁴ The very existence of inscriptions on buildings speaks to the fact that the aristocracy was active in urban life and readily spending money to improve the condition of the city.⁴⁵ When problems arose in the world of the Romans, the aristocracy remained aware and involved in maintaining the city, sending out the message that “Rome will survive forever, because it is governed by an aristocracy that represents the eternal virtues,”⁴⁶.

The Roman aristocracy managed to carry onwards the ideals from pre-Christian Rome, and they would soon find themselves in religious seats of power. Christianity in Rome created new religious positions that needed to be filled, offering new titles of power that functioned- for all intents and purposes- as the secular ones had in the past.⁴⁷ The emperor needed the aristocracy to legitimize his rule as he was not an autocrat- the aristocracy was a vital part of imperial rule.⁴⁸ Emperors could not solely favor Christians but also had to hold room for Pagans in office, meaning each emperor had to successfully balance both sides of the religious sphere in order to rule.⁴⁹ Under Constantine, churches and clergy would receive imperial patronage but he also made sure that the state remained a vital player.⁵⁰ Constantine expanded the aristocratic class and appointed old, new, and- most importantly- Christian aristocrats to office.⁵¹ Christians were now favored by the emperor and being part of this faith guaranteed status, increasing the rate of conversion among the aristocracy.⁵² One of the main hurdles to overcome was asceticism and how the idea of giving up one’s earthly possessions in the name of Christianity did not

⁴⁴ Alföldy, “*Difficillima Tempora: Urban Life, Inscriptions, and Mentality in Late Antique Rome*”.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁷ Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵² Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*.

appeal to the vastly wealthy.⁵³ To combat this, important religious figures such as Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome spoke about almsgiving and charity as ways to live this more ascetic lifestyle without actually giving up one's financial security.⁵⁴ In framing generosity to the poor as an investment for one's own salvation, the aristocracy was enticed into almsgiving.⁵⁵ Reciprocity is inherent in this version of charity, with the mindset of giving so that others will give in return- in this case that would be support for the aristocracy, typically in the form of votes.⁵⁶ Without the aristocracy, Christianity could not have taken hold of the Romans as it would come to. Church leaders adopted aristocratic ideals and aspects of Christianity, such as almsgiving and charity, as these were 'aristocratized' to be more palatable.⁵⁷

For both Rome and England, the aristocracy made up only a portion of the people required for a major conversion in religion- the average man had to be considered. English people kept most of the spectacles related to the Catholic church after the Protestant-Reformation because without them, there would have been massive pushback.⁵⁸ Holy days of obligation and other religious holidays, such as Shrove Tuesday, were somewhat removed from the Catholic aspect and took on the role of existing just as a way to gather as a community.⁵⁹ There also existed a problem of local control throughout England and the further away one was from London, the less likely Protestant reforms were being instituted as harshly as they were meant to be.⁶⁰ This accounts for the way some smaller parishes such as Morebath, in Exeter, continued on with Catholic traditions such as lighting candles, celebrating specific holy days of obligation for

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Bucholz, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History. Early Modern England 1485-1714.*

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Bucholz, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History. Early Modern England 1485-1714.*

the town saints, long after the Protestant Reformation.⁶¹ As long as the churches continued to look, act, and function in mostly the same way, the average early-modern Englishman would be satisfied.

When it came to the Romans, Paganism had public sacrifices and public ways to show off the religion whereas Christianity was private and more reserved- this would need to change in order to attract the masses.⁶² The Codex-Calendar of 354 AD is one of the ways Pagan and Christian beliefs coexisted for a period, fighting for dominance.⁶³ The Roman aristocracy was based on traditional paganism and because of this the typical pagan holidays such as the celebration of Roma Aeterna were still present at this date.⁶⁴ In this calendar there are many Pagan and Christian holidays mentioned together, exemplifying how slow the conversion process was- the Romans loved to celebrate and taking that away would not go over well.⁶⁵ Christianity had to conquer time through the calendar, by making Pagan festivals more secular than religious, the Romans could enjoy the usual festivals but also be good Christians since new Christian holidays would happen on the same day or around the same time.⁶⁶ Spectacles in the Roman world were part of life and when the government attempted to interfere under the guise of Christianity, there was inevitably going to be backlash. Paganism was intrinsically linked with political urban life, everyday life, and religious life. In order to keep the spectacles going, they would need to be somewhat secularized before a new Christian holiday or festival could take over.⁶⁷ Christianity had a problem with the games of Rome, so now they would be desacralized

⁶¹ Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*.

⁶² Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*.

⁶³ Salzman, *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Lim, "People as Power: Games, Munificence, and Contested Topography".

and festivals could happen without being tied to a specific religious aspect.⁶⁸ So long as the usual entertainment continued, the people could learn how to call festivals by different names and remove the Pagan association from them. This went hand in hand with an emerging Christian topography of Rome. If the people wanted to see spectacles, a Christian procession would give them that. The once Pagan festivals could be overwritten by events such as martyr death anniversaries, which could then be turned into a procession through the city where stops would be made at points of religious significance.⁶⁹ In doing this very public display, people would be drawn off the street to investigate what was happening in these processions, and soon there were spots all over the city of memorable importance.⁷⁰

Constantine and Henry VIII even shared similarities in terms of failed counter movements against Christianity and Protestantism. In England, Mary I would attempt to institute a Catholic Counter-Reformation, but it would prove to be an impossible feat for her to accomplish. What she needed was a long reign and a strong heir- which she would be granted neither of.⁷¹ The Protestant aristocracy which her father created from the selling of monastic land, would- unsurprisingly- not be eager to give up their land and subsequent status to a religion they did not subscribe to.⁷² Mary's claim to the throne was hereditarily solid yet she failed to lean into the aspect people wanted from her, the image of her father, Henry. With failed foreign policy mounting on top of unpopular Protestant persecutions and a poorly received push towards Catholicism, Mary would find herself unable to reverse the Protestant Reformation her father started.⁷³ In Rome, after the reign of Constantius II, Julian the Apostate would attempt to return

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bucholz, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History. Early Modern England 1485-1714.*

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Bucholz, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History. Early Modern England 1485-1714.*

the empire to Paganism from 361 to 363 AD.⁷⁴ His reforms went as far as instituting Pagan ceremonies and increasing the status of Pagan priests.⁷⁵ Julian wanted a return to Hellenism which was met with somewhat mixed feelings.⁷⁶ However, the fact that a record of his reforms and musings about Pagan religion have survived can be interpreted as the empire not being entirely revolted by his ideas.⁷⁷ Regardless, he died too early to follow through with most of his plans, similar to the circumstances of Mary I.

Constantine and Henry VIII's actions surrounding the changing religious sphere of their respective times led to similar effects in both periods. Both rulers had to be cautiously ambiguous with their personal involvement and legislation since they had to balance two opposing views in religion, maintaining a tolerable status quo was vital. For Constantine, Christianity had to move from private to public worship which involved the designation of public land for his building projects such as the Lateran and St Peter's Basilicas. Land use in Henry VIII's time was reversed, the private Roman Catholic lands of the realm being taken by the Crown and then redistributed to Protestant aristocrats who now suddenly had more land, wealth, and power than previously. The aristocracy in both eras played intensely important roles. Roman aristocrats kept urban life going, financially supporting the restoration of buildings and utilizing this patronage as an act of charity which Christianity called for in order for one's own salvation. English aristocrats were increasingly Protestant and would hold high office, especially seen with bishoprics as the monarch personally appointed these. The wealth and leadership of the aristocracy are fundamental reasons for why Roman Christianity and Protestantism were able to be accepted by a vast amount of people in each age. Spectacles and the specific topography of

⁷⁴ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 91.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the region also facilitated religious change. Average people, which is what the demographic of the masses were, needed spectacles to partake in their faith. Without spectacles such as processions, holy days, and other religious events, religion might be negligible to those who are not literate in ecclesiastical texts- it is through actions and entertainment that these people were able to understand and enjoy their faith. Topographically speaking, Rome's spectacles were further enforced by the specific sites of each place of worship as the entire city was marked with martyr burials, churches, and other influential religious sites.⁷⁸ Without each of these facets, Roman Christianity and English Protestantism would not have survived to the present day. Although Constantine and Henry VIII are separated by hundreds of years, the circumstances surrounding the religious changes they were witnessed too are significantly similar and reveal a pattern- without the willingness and cooperation of the people, these religions would have failed to take hold or have the impact they do today.

⁷⁸ Lim, "People as Power: Games, Munificence, and Contested Topography".

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