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# **C**hristianity and Greco-Roman polytheism in the fourth century. The role of Emperor Constantine the Great in the imposition of Christianity

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## **Abstract**

The Edict of Mediolanum in 313 AD made St. Constantine the Great enter the history of the Church, being considered similar to the Apostles . He will lay the foundation for new relations between Church and State. Since St. Constantine, the church will experience a new stage, from persecutions to building churches and adorning them, to involvement in the major doctrinal disputes, helping the poor, etc. But, more than that, the king will take some action against paganism, especially against those who were against the religious manifestations of Christian morality. His approach will be continued by the Emperor Theodosius the Great.

## **Keywords**

St. Constantine the Great, Greco-Roman polytheism, Christian Church.

The 4th century will see a fundamental shift in religious terms. If the beginning is to record one of the bloodiest persecution against Christianity, that of Diocletian, the century will record the decree (edict) of the Emperor

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Theodosius the Great which made the Orthodox faith legal for all the subjects of the empire. Between these two points occurring during the Holy Emperor Constantine the Great, the edict of tolerance of Mediolanum in 313 AD will grant freedom of expression to Christianity. The event which took place 1700 years ago has to be celebrated and that is why, 2013 was dedicated to Saints Constantine and Helena and the role that they played in ending the persecution of Christianity and even in the encouragement of the new religion.

St. Constantine brought the final victory for Christianity. Historians consider the conversion of Constantine a turning point, at least two elements supporting it: the ending of persecution and the Edict of Mediolanum with Licinius, when tolerance and also sympathy for Christianity and support of the new religion start together. This attitude is reflected in the legislation issued. Constantine creates a new relation between Church and State, which will see further development (with some gaps though: Licinius, Julian the Apostate) to Theodosius the Great and even later.<sup>1</sup> From the fourth century to the sixth century, the kings Constantine, Theodosius and Justinian Church will grant different privileges, such as disposal of a part of the judicial power, the monopoly upon benefactions, impressive buildings being erected over the holy places in the history of Christianity, where no longer holy Victory and Justice of their predecessors were represented, but Christ-Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) or Divine Peace (Saint Irene).<sup>2</sup> Between church and state there will appear a balanced report known as „Byzantine symphony”, which appears as follows in Justinian’s sixth Novela, dating from March 16 535: „The greatest gifts that God has made men are the priests and the Empire. The priests for serving divine things and Empire for the human affairs”.<sup>3</sup> Even though it was never a precise legal wording, „Byzantine symphony” has been more like a mood than a system of government. There were attempts to subordinate the Church by the emperor, but the state has not undergone formal church, and after the ninth century Eastern Church gave patriarchs able

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<sup>1</sup> See in this respect Giorgio Joss, *From the origin to the Council of Nicaea*, in *History of Religions. II. Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Filoramo Giovanni, Cornelia Dumitru trans. by Polirom, Science, 2008, p. 213.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Jean Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church Yesterday and Today*, by Cătălin Lazarca, Traditional Publishing Anastasia, Bucharest, 1996, p. 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

to resist imperial arbitrariness.<sup>4</sup> But before this stage, the Church had to endure persecution of paganism. Although Constantine was accused of having paved the way the Caesar-Papism in the Byzantine Empire, Jean Meyendorff concluded that: „The true legacy of what constitutes the Christian Empire after Constantine’s conversion is not the Caesar-Papism but „the state of Christendom”, the Empire and the Church have no longer been two different societies, they became one: „the Christian society” that *Oikoumene* Orthodox religious in which the political and religious power will be two complementary aspects.<sup>5</sup>

## I. Christianity persecuted

Historian Lactantius, in his *Persecutors’ death*, reviews the persecutor emperors and makes a correlation between that persecution against Christians and the end of each of them. Thus, Decius - „a disgusting beast” that has hurt church, died not even having the honor of a tomb, but „stripped of clothes, remained naked, as an enemy of God, food for the beasts and birds”<sup>6</sup>, Valerian, who, for a little while, made a lot of Christian sacrifices, was caught by the Persians, losing his freedom and living in the most ignominious slavery, and after his death, his skin was peeled, painted red and placed in a temple.<sup>7</sup> Aurelian, another king persecutor, failed to implement the decree of persecution because his friends killed him in Cenofrurium - a city of Thrace. However, Diocletian „was decided to destroy everything” confronting God and started the worst persecution. According to the testimony of Eusebius of Caesarea, the great persecution against Christians had been caused by one of the predictions of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. This would have made the prophecy that „the righteous of the earth” embarrassed the gods in discovering the truth, which lead to unfair prophecies given by the haruspices.<sup>8</sup> To the

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Lucius Caecilius Lactantius, *Liber ad Donatum Confessore of mortibus persecutorum. About death persecutors* 4, 3, bilingual edition, Cristian Traditional Bejan Polirom, Iasi, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Lucius Caecilius Lactantius, *Liber ad Donatum Confessore of mortibus persecutorum. About death persecutors* 5, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Bronze tripod was that three-legged stool that Sybilla stood during the predictions that came from Apollo.

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question „who exactly could this” righteous of the earth be? ‘one of the priests pointed to the Christians and the Emperor Diocletian ordered to „Punish the bastards”, „giving even those deadly commands”.<sup>9</sup> Lactantius also mentioned that several of the servants participating in sacrifice were Christians and they have made the sign of the cross on their forehead, a gesture meant to scare away demons and the haruspices did not see the usual signs. After other sacrifices that have not found anything, Tages, the chief of the haruspices blamed the profane people who witnessed.<sup>10</sup> This was the motivation for the persecution of Christians of the fourth century, one of the worst ever known persecution of Christians.

The persecution against the Christians started after the publication of the edict of 24 February 303 AD and meant the destruction of all Christian churches and homes where there were Christian Scriptures; burning Scripture and liturgical books and religious objects, banning gatherings for celebration offices. Christians could not go to court in a trial of outrage, adultery or theft, those who had lost their legal privileges and were liable to torture, regardless of their social status and stage. They were arrested and burned at the stake, and the crowd was too big because they were burned in groups, not individually. Prisons were full and in front of the audience halls and courts there were made altars for sacrifices, and they all had to make sacrifices to the gods.

Diocletian’s persecution was not deleted from the memory of the Church yet, being referred to for centuries, even today representing a milestone in the history of crimes against the Christians. That is why the measures taken by Constantine the Great were so important after the cessation of the persecution.

## **II. Remedial action taken by St. Constantine the Christians**

Remedial measures taken in favor of Christianity had its beginning in the Edict of Galerius (30 April 311 AD), which is also the starting point of the Christianization of the empire, an edict published and signed by the four

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<sup>9</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine II*, LI, in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine and other writings*, the second edition, Col. Church Fathers and Writers. New Series 8 Alexandrescu Traditional Radu, Romanian Patriarchal Basilica Publishing, Bucharest, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Lucius Caecilius Lactantius, *Liber ad Donatum Confessore of mortibus persecutorum. About persecutors death* 10 March.

leaders of the empire. Text edict provide forgiveness for the Christians who could „live again”, could raise their places of worship directed to God in return for prayers for the health of the king and government.

Although the conversion to Christianity of Constantine the Great was a process that took several steps, it seems that the crucial moment of the event was created 1700 years ago, when on 28 October 312, on the sky, in Rome, there appeared, to the king and his army, the sign of the cross, made of light and accompanied by the words „By this you shall conquer”. This turning point, that influenced his later becoming, had the natural consequence the edict of religious freedom given along with Licinius in February 313 at Mediolanum (Milan), in which Christians and other believers in the Roman Empire became fully free to manifest faith

„... and we give Christians and all other people the opportunity to follow their religion freely and that each one wants, because any deity would find heavenly abode [it] to be able to show favorable and gracious to us and to all those are under our power [...] We did it not to look like I put any restriction cult or a religion. In addition, I decided that this decision should be elected me to the Christian community.”<sup>11</sup>

From now Christian Church was recognized as the official institution and will be encouraged by the steps taken by St. Constantine the Great, to the detriment of Greco-Roman polytheism. Therefore, we can say that the new Christian religion owes much to St. Constantine the Great who will be called similar to the „Apostles”, the thirteenth apostle.

Thus, Emperor Constantine the Great becomes the follower of Christianity and takes constant action in favor of the Christian Church and the empire which he leads will get a new spiritual look. The century of Constantine (the IVth) will become the golden century of Christianity through the work of the great Fathers of the Church who will live and work in this period, but this was not possible without the manifestation of the freedom Constantine granted the Church. Without the engagement „of a personality with such a political power in the life of the Roman state, the rapid progress of the Christian Church could not be explained. Persecution of any kind against Christians cease, they shall enjoy all civil and religious rights of the other citizens of the empire.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Lucius Caecilius Lactantius, *Liber ad Donatum Confessore of mortibus persecutorum. About death persecutors* 48, 2, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Emilian Popescu, Prolog, in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine and other writings*, p. 5.

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The Christian Testimony of the Emperor Constantine the Great was a full and complete one and, unfairly just some aspects of his life are referred to, the issue of the religious tolerance the Edict of Mediolanum in 313 or the sign of the cross before the fight against Maxentius in 312 at Milvian bridge. If we were to believe his most authoritative biographer, Eusebius of Caesarea, the sanctity of Constantine emerges from countless other acts, some not as spectacular, but testifying about his intimate communion with God.

**II. 1. Choosing the Christian God**

Eusebius informs us more about the measures taken by Emperor Constantine the Great since he sat on the imperial throne. First, the king understood that he „needed a stronger support than the military one, fact that made him firstly seek help from God and then the interest in arming his soldiers and care to have a large army.”<sup>13</sup> But the question that worried him was: which God to worship in such a variety of religious offerings? Based on conclusions that Father Staniloae calls „the knowledge of God in the concrete circumstances of life”, the king is aware that

„almost all who had been rulers before him surrendered their fate to the multitude of gods - whom had served with libations, sacrifices and offerings - after having been deceived by all kinds of oracles and favorable predictions, all had ended badly, without any of the gods to come to their aid to save them from the terrible fate that had befallen them up.”<sup>14</sup>

In this context, the king realizes that only his father, who had worship „the God above all” and did not persecute the young religion in rejecting the worship of the gods, „finds salvation in Him and [true] guardian of his throne, as well as generator of all goods”.<sup>15</sup> This belief was strengthened

<sup>13</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine I*, XXVII, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine I*, XXVII, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine I*, XXVII, 2. See the testimony of Lactantius, who claims that Constantine was different from all the others and was the only one worthy to rule the empire. However, in order not to give the impression that it opposes the destruction of several orders of superiors allowed small places where Christians gathered but did not persecute the Christians. See Lucius Caecilius Lactantius, *Liber ad Donatum Confessore of mortibus persecutorum. About death persecutors* 8, 7, 15, 7.

by the vision of the sign of the cross, in the middle of the day, accompanied by the inscription „conquer through it!”, the sign of the cross appearing on his banner in fights. After the victory against Maxentius and with the triumphal entry into Rome, the eternal city, the king will reveal the winning mark, witnessing the Son of God.

In many occasions, St. Constantine prove his loyalty to God by publishing his teachings that rise against „the idol worshipping” and urging his subjects to „bear witness to God Most High and Christ to be called their Savior.”<sup>16</sup> The Emperor imposed honoring Sunday as a day of rest for the subjects. The whole army was taught to honor the day of Christ, called „day of the light” or „day of the sun” and the Christian soldiers were allowed to attend church on this day. As we shall see, the Christian king not only preached, but he also applied his Christian precepts.

## II.2. Refunds, construction and beautification of churches

During St. Constantine the Great „the Church receives a privileged legal status, that the state recognizes the validity of the episcopal court judgments, even in civil matters.”<sup>17</sup> Above all, Emperor Constantine’s changes, enhanced prestige and authority enjoyed by the Christian clergy. Eusebius in the *Vita Constantini* mentions this:

„In their edicts, before the people had spread in all the calumnies against the rulers of the Church, well, Constantine made their reputation grow back again after that (due to special honor) raised them even more, making them - through decisions and laws - increase even more in authority.”<sup>18</sup>

Before the reign of Constantine, the Christian Church suffered greatly, being confiscated the goods gathered in the brief periods of freedom and peace enjoyed during the three centuries of existence. A remedy taken immediately after his victory over Maxentius was to return the Christians the property and to recall those in exile, as Eusebius says, „... everywhere was published an imperial rescript for those who had been deprived of this right to enjoy their property, and those exiled in an arbitrary way recall

<sup>16</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine II*, XLVII, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Mircea Eliade, *History of Religious beliefs and ideas. From Gautama Buddha to the triumph of Christianity*, Vol. 2, Universitas Publishing House, Chisinau, 1992, p. 398.

<sup>18</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine III*, I, 3.

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them to their homes, breaking down chains ...".<sup>19</sup> The refunds made show that the Church had certain movable and immovable assets before entering the terrible persecution of Diocletian.

The king condemned the persecutions of the Church of Christ made by the other kings, „the wicked good will of tyrants” recalled the masonry work of the churches that have collapsed because they could not be maintained, and the modest proportions of the buildings that had to be much more impressive. Moreover, he endowed churches of God „through his own means, building prayer houses, making them more imposing, and adorning the most important sanctuaries of the churches with many votive offerings.”<sup>20</sup> Through the letters to the bishops Constantine Great reminded and advised them „to compel the work that must be done through sanctuaries, namely: either to restore the existing walls or to proceed to new ones.”<sup>21</sup>

Constantine took care of the construction of places of worship in the main cities, the capitals of provinces or in the places of interest in the history of Christianity. This explains why, along with his mother, Saint Helena, was particularly concerned about building an imposing church on the spot of the Resurrection in Jerusalem,<sup>22</sup> on his birthplace in Bethlehem or in other locations such as: the place of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives or Eleon Mountain. The new imperial capital, Constantinople, enjoyed a special attention, as he endowed it with beautiful Christian churches after he previously

„decided to clean up the city... of all forms of idolatry, in the temples there no longer remained any trace of statues of so-called gods that can be worshiped, nor altars stained with the blood of the sacrifices or feasts thrilled with demons, or any other form of superstition.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine I*, XLI, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Eusebius, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine I*, XLII, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Eusebius, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine II*, XLVI, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Eusebiu recounts how over the place of the Holy Sepulchre of the Lord pagans put piles of earth to hide the site. Moreover, they even built a temple to Aphrodite, „they prepared up there, above, a truly dreadful sepulcher of souls, dedicated to the lifeless idols ,exalting the spirit of Aphrodite in a dark place. There, on some cursed and unholy altars, they brought their sacrifices, convinced that only in those defiling caves their wishes be fulfilled”, see Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine III* , XXVI, 3. See in this regard and Cyrus Bishop Theodoret, *Church History*, I, 17, 1-8 by Prof. Vasile Sibiescu Traditional Publishing Bible and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Eusebius, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine III*, XLVII, 2.



Other cities that have enjoyed impressive churches were the capital of Bithynia, Antioch etc.

So, in a short period of time the relationship between church and state is undergoing a radical change, from the persecution of the Church to the significant acquisition of privileges, which indicates the role played by this providential man.

### II.3. Involvement in major doctrinal disputes

His concern for the good of the Church will make him to intervene in the major doctrinal turmoil of the fourth century, even if he had no theologian training. He organized synods of the bishops of the empire, thus taking a great responsibility, like a bishop. He says about himself, addressing the bishops „You are bishops of the inside of the Church, God put me bishop of those outside it.”<sup>24</sup> But, before the convening of the First Ecumenical Council, he skillfully tried to mediate the conflict between the great heretic Arius and Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, sending Hosius of Cordoba, his counselor, with a letter. This shows his concern for peace in the Church of Christ. As no result has been reached, he decided to convene a high council of bishops of the empire. So, he called the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, in 325 AD which solved the doctrinal controversy regarding the second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, whom the heretic Arius considered only a creature of the Father, while the Synod Fathers, numbering 318, will confess the Orthodox way, deoexistence of the Son with the Father. Arius radicalized the subordinate position that was adopted, in part, by Origen and said that God is necessarily an ingenerate being, being immutable and the Son cannot be truly God and therefore is created. He based his statements on a scriptural text of the Old Testament, a passage from Proverbs 8, 22, where Wisdom says: „God built me at the beginning of his work.” The holy Fathers respond to this heretical teaching concept of *homoousios* (consubstantial) in the relationship between Father and Son, a formula that „was the basis for all subsequent theological reflection on the Trinity.”<sup>25</sup> Then was fixed the celebration date of Easter. The convening of the First Ecumenical Council by Saint Constantine the Great made a saving gesture for the Church and for the future solutions to the

<sup>24</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine IV*, XXIV.

<sup>25</sup> G. Joss, *From the origin until the Council of Nicaea*, in *op. cit.*, p. 214.

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doctrinal issues emerged: Ecumenical Council meeting to be attended by most of the bishops of the Roman Empire and have authority for the whole Church. The king not only decided the convening of the councils, but also participated in the debates.

„He would sit somewhere in their midst, as if he was only one of them [some] from the first row, leaving outside his spearmen and guards, along with the entire guard, abandoning himself to the fear of God and accepting to be surrounded only by his devoted friends.”<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea states that, usually, the king's entourage will enter God's servants, he himself being one of them - not to mention the Holy Constantine honoring them, showing them friendship both in deed and in word, and constantly taking them with him not only in the councils, but also in his travels, being aware that he attracts the willingness of the God served by them. The king showed his bishops an immeasurable honor. During the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, seeing those who had suffered from persecution, the king will kiss the wounds, „believing that the kiss will receive the blessing now.”<sup>27</sup>

Based on the privilege that Emperor Constantine had, that of the „bishop of the outside” or „Foreign Affairs” he will intervene in the so-called Donatist issue. After the persecution of Diocletian, Carthage broke a conflict between the traditionalist Christians and the looser clergy. The new bishop, Caecilian, was accused that among the bishops who have ordained him, would have been a „traitor”, that is, a bishop who had taught the Scriptures to the state officials during the persecution. Numidia bishops proposed a new bishop, Maiorinus, which led to the birth of a local schisms. This was complicated later, because, to the theological and disciplinary problem there was added the social and political ones. Donatus, the leader of the traditionalists, will win the support of party of the indigenous rural population hostile to the Roman nobility. Thus, even the Donatists asked the king to intervene to restore peace, which will be made, the king being concerned with the religious issue in question, but also with the political consequences that might appear. First, the Bishop of Rome,

<sup>26</sup> Eusebius, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine I*, XLIV, 2. See also the Bishop Theodoret of Cyrus, *Church History*, I, 7, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus, *Church History*, I, 11, 2.

Milthiades, was entrusted the matter, then he sent it to a synod at Arles (in 314), the finally solved it personally, actually being accused of having failed by the fluctuations of the two religious groups.<sup>28</sup>

#### II.4. Caring for the needy

The king knew that he cannot serve the invisible God if he does not help his neighbour in distress. The needy have not been forgotten by Constantine, being offered money and mercy even to non-Christians who asked for help. The beggars in markets were also taken care of not to lack money and food and to have proper clothes. Those who have lost their possessions and wealth were helped to reach the same condition, equipping them with worthy estates or with various honors, „he acted as a father for the poor orphans, he defended the defenseless widows, the girls left without their parents support were married to wealthy men whom he endowed with what they ought to bring as brides in marriage.”<sup>29</sup> He provided wheat for the poor, orphans and widows. From the time of St. Constantine the Great comes the habit of offering food every year to „those who kept their virginity for life, to the widows and to those devoted to religious services.”<sup>30</sup> Theodoret says that this was born out of the king’s generosity and not because they really needed and this betrays his Christian commitment. A third of those gifts were offered during Theodoret’s ruling. A special law decided that no Christian could be slave to the Jews, because it is not lawful that those liberated by Christ to fall under the dominion of those who persecuted him.

Historian Eusebius wants to make us understand that all these facts have led to the visible manifestation of God’s presence, which as a theophany „unexpectedly miraculously appearing, giving the news, in a way or another, about the various facts that had to happen... Protected by it, Constantine’s life could reel in a quiet serenity and joy offered to him by the obedience of his subjects... but above all, he enjoyed the light of the churches of God”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> G. Joss, *From the origin to the Council of Nicaea*, in *op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>29</sup> Eusebius, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine I*, XLIII, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus, *Church History*, I, 11, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Eusebius, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine I*, XLVII, 3-4.

**III. „The prosecuted become persecutors”<sup>32</sup>**

Mircea Eliade is convinced that Constantine's conversion assured the official Christianization of the Roman Empire. From this period date the early Christian symbols on coins (year 315 AD), and the last pagan images disappear in 323 AD. Christians accede to the highest dignity in the state, and pagans are increasingly marginalized. Even if Eliade's expression is tough, it depicts the rise and decay of the old polytheist system and the ascension of the new religion, even if we record the manifestations of paganism at the end of the next century, especially in the rural areas. As a proof of this we have St. Augustine's work entitled *De catechizantis rudibus* (About the catechization of the people in villages).

**III.1. Measures taken by St. Constantine the Great against the heathen**

Emperor Constantine the Great has a series of measures against the followers of paganism, although they were still the majority in the empire. Proved to be a skilful diplomat, he still retains the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, showing that remain supreme religious authority polytheistic cults, but behaving like a true Christian and being baptized only on his deathbed. This is indicated in a letter to the king of Persia:

„I ask His help, bowing my knees, running away from the blood spilt, avoiding any unpleasant odor and obnoxious (idol) and any earthly glow. However, the error of the wicked and shameful smearing has crashed many peoples and all nations and pushed them into the lower parts (hell).”<sup>33</sup>

He no longer associated his picture with the pagan cults, asking not to be represented in the temples. The emperor's courage to act against the religious majority is explained by the fact that the followers of paganism of his day were not very vocal, even among believers that are critical of the pagan Greco-Roman deities.

<sup>32</sup> M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p 398. It is an expression used by Eliade too hard, which tries to present a reality that emerged with the arrival of the Roman Empire leadership of Emperor Constantine the Great and especially with the reign of Theodosius the Great, who perfects the work started by Constantine, ie the Christianization of the Empire, and finally the banning of paganism.

<sup>33</sup> Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus, *Church History* I, 25, 3. See also Eusebius, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine* IV, X, 1.

Among the measures imposed by the king we can mention the appointment of governors of provinces who have already embraced the Christian faith. Then he banned the sacrifices to idols. This prohibition was aimed „the same restriction was for the officials as well as for the governor, as watching them and those who previously had held the position of prefect.”<sup>34</sup> Constantine also issued two other laws that put an end to once widespread religious practice among the heathen: no one else was allowed to raise a statue dedicated to some god, nor to deal with predictions, ie. divination, which was part of pagan worship. With the application of these laws Eusebius of Caesarea remarked the following: „It was as if the madness of faith in a bunch of gods would have perished [in the meantime], and almost all people would show the desire to get God’s favor.”<sup>35</sup>

On the king’s command, there were destroyed the sacrificial places, pagan statues were thrown into the fire, thereby facilitating the penetration of Christianity. The king demolished the entrances gates of the temples, remaining with empty lobbies and roofs which were subject to rapid decay. Bronze statues of pagan deities could be seen now in all capital markets, symbols of the old religions, such as a tripod or the smintian Pythia, and the Helicon Muses were exposed at the indifferent and contemptuous glances of the city residents who had become Christians. Gold and silver statues were rifled and removed not to be a hindrance to those who wanted to adopt the new faith. In achieving all the above mentioned facts, the king did not use the military force, but some friends, showing once again that the Greco-Roman polytheism no longer interested the population, and the holy king took advantage of this religious indifferentism. There is also testimony about the destruction to the foundations of two pagan temples. One is the temple dedicated to Aphrodite, who was in Aphaka in Mount Lebanon, Phrygian earth. It was a secret place far from urban settlements, a place for sacred prostitution, being a place of destruction, „a school of vice.” The other temple was dedicated to „the demon from Cilicia” which occasionally showed himself, in the sleep of suffering people, who came to sleep in his sanctuary. The king ordered that the temple be demolished to the ground.

### **III.2. Measures taken by Theodosius the Great against the heathen**

Emperor Theodosius the Great perfects the work of Saint Constantine. In his time, „Christianity became the state religion and paganism is prohibited

<sup>34</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine II*, XLIV.

<sup>35</sup> Eusebius, *On the Life of Blessed Emperor Constantine II*, XLV, 1.

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permanently; the oppressed become oppressors.”<sup>36</sup> Although he was born in a Christian family (both his father, General Flavius Theodosius the Elder and his mother Thermantia being Orthodox Christians) was not baptized Theodosius earlier than the autumn of 380 at the age of 33, by Bishop Acholius of Thessaloniki, after making sure that this bishop was not fond of Arianism heresy which began to make more followers in the Roman Empire. The involvement of the king in the religious life of the empire is done on two levels: he combated heresies, especially Arianism and paganism, eradicating its last remnants.

As soon as he got co-emperor (Augustus) to the east of the Roman Empire, Theodosius began actively working against heresies, especially Arianism. Thus, in February 380, together with Gratian (emperor of the West), issued an edict (decree) that the Orthodox faith was compulsory for all his subjects. Two days after the entry of the emperor in Constantinople on 24 November 380, Theodosius banished Demophilus, an Arian bishop, and instead appointed St. Gregory the Theologian (Gregory Nazianzen), who was the spiritual leader of the Orthodox community in Constantinople and an uncompromised defender of the Nicene Creed. This sparked discontent among the Aryans, who translated discontent even with an attempt to assassinate the king. Theodosius did not return, but convened an important synod in Constantinople in May 381, synod which was to remain in the history of the Church as the Second Ecumenical Council. Although throughout his reign Theodosius was a staunch defender of Orthodox Christianity, especially regarding the Trinitarian faith as settled during the first two Ecumenical Councils, he tried to be conciliatory with the heretics, but without success.

The second aspect of involvement in the religious life of the Emperor Theodosius Empire focused on destroying the last remnants of paganism. Thus in 388 prefects were appointed in the new oriental provinces, with the express mission to destroy the temples of pagan gods. In 391, Theodosius refused to restore the traditional altar of Victory in the Roman Senate, he was the one that ended the Olympic Games, which had a tradition of over a thousand years. Basically, between 391-392 all pagan temples in the Roman Empire were closed. Emperor Theodosius ended, by a decree, the pagan sacrifices (as there were still practiced) in Rome and Alexandria, banned the domestic worship of the gods, with all paganism involved. Thus, an ancient religious tradition put an end to

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<sup>36</sup> M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 398.

private practices and public ones,<sup>37</sup> but it continued to influence Christian worship in different forms which were gradually Christianized.

#### IV. Conclusions

Following the conversion of the pagan cult of *Deus Sol Invictus* to faith in Christ „Sun of Righteousness” St. Constantine put an end to all forms of persecution against Christians and will manifest consistently in favor of the new religion. This will lead to the gradual Christianization of the Roman Empire in a relatively short time, a process facilitated by the religious indifference that marked the final stage of Greco-Roman religion, the syncretistic one.

It would be unfair to consider just the spectacular measures taken in favor of Christianity by St. Constantine the Great, neglecting other, perhaps of equal importance. Among them we mention the constant concern for the poor, and the banning away from the religious landscape of the polytheistic religious practices, especially those which went into an obvious conflict with the proposed new spirituality of Christianity.

The changes will be maintained by the other kings of the fourth century, such as Theodosius the Great, who will contribute decisively to the disappearance of the ancient religions, even if there were some nostalgic kings on the earlier polytheism, and we mean especially, Julian the Apostate. But the direction set by King Constantine and the Christian foundation for church-state relations will be crucial from now on and they will not be ignored by subsequent emperors, only accidentally. Saint Constantine remains a reference for all the later Christian leaders and it would not be bad if he could be taken as a model by nowadays leaders.

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<sup>37</sup> With increasing power, the monks will eradicate the last manifestations of pagan religiosity in the sacred space. Thus, Eliade notes that the late fourth century witnessed, „from Mesopotamia to North Africa a wave of violence committed by monks: in 388 Callinicum they set fire to a synagogue near the Euphrates, and terrorized Syrian villages as they were pagan temples, in 391, Patriarch of Alexandria, Theophilus, called the monks to „cleanse” Serapeum, the citadel of the great temple of Serapis. At the same time, they broke into homes to seek heathen idols ... ”, see M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 399. If these signs appear in the eyes of a historian of religions true barbarians, in the logic of faith they are perfectly coherent and in line with the teaching of the Christian faith that draws attention to the fact that man cannot serve two or more rule (gods).