

When Our World Became Christian,
312-394 Paul Veyne

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Paul Veyne's *When Our World Became Christian*, originally published in France in 2007 as *Quand notre monde est devenu chrétien* and now translated into English by Janet Lloyd for Polity Press, takes its readers on a fascinating journey through the crucial events that took place in the Western world between 300 and 400 AD. Veyne, Honorary Professor at the Collège de France and author of important studies such as *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* (1988) and *Bread and Circuses* (1990), here investigates Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 AD and the subsequent Christianization of the West.

Divided into eleven brief chapters, *When Our World Became Christian* principally focuses on Constantine's momentous religious change; on the behaviour he adopted towards the Church; and on the (perhaps surprising) cohabitation between pagan and Christian cults - a cohabitation that peacefully continued almost throughout the fourth century. Alongside considering the decline of paganism and the rise of Christianity, in his ninth chapter Veyne touches on the birth of anti-Semitism and sees the Jews' 'hybrid' condition as

the source of the repugnance felt by Christians and pagans alike towards them; furthermore, in his Appendix he explores both the establishment of monotheism and the concurrent subsistence of polytheism among the ancient Jewish tribes.

Together with providing a very helpful summary of Constantine's actions before and after 312 AD, the first chapter highlights the exceptionality of the emperor's conduct and portrays his revolution as one of the most daring acts ever performed by a sovereign. According to Veyne, Constantine genuinely appreciated the 'spiritual superiority' of Christianity over paganism and believed that he could be a great emperor only with the help of a great God – an almighty and compassionate God who rewarded the faithful with everlasting salvation (p. 15). Developing the argument of the opening chapter, the second and the third chapter define Christianity and the Church as 'masterpieces'; by fleshing out their uniqueness, Veyne makes the reader appreciate the qualities which most likely appealed to Constantine and to many of his contemporaries. Christianity was original because it was a religion of love; because its god was both gigantic and kind; and because its morality taught one to worship God through obedience, not through offerings or bloody sacrifices. Likewise, the Church was novel because its members professed their faith; because it was a proselytizing organism; and because its message addressed all social classes. In particular, as Veyne effectively puts it, Christianity 'offered the poor something that should have remained a privilege of the elite' and thus managed to win over the Western people in a slow but relentless manner (p. 43).

In addition to a very accessible prose, the chief merit of Veyne's volume is its construction of evidence through the persistent

employment of factual examples. Indeed, by divulging interesting (and perhaps little known) details concerning ‘the hero of this great story’ and his epoch, the central chapters corroborate the author’s consideration of Constantine as a sincere and disinterested new believer, and of Christianity as an avant-garde movement (p. 1). Chapter 4 recounts the dream Constantine had the night before his victory at the battle of the Milvian Bridge: in his sleep the Emperor saw the ‘Christogram’ (a symbol made of the first two letters of Christ’s name, the Greek X and P) and heard God saying: ‘By this sign, you will conquer’. As the reader learns in chapter 6, Constantine was baptized some 25 years after his conversion and therefore ‘he became a Christian all on his own’ (p. 78). His public actions, however, would clearly show his new faith to his people: for example, after the battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine (and his troops) entered Rome bearing the Christogram on his shield and hence stated that Christ himself had secured the military triumph. The wealth of intriguing particulars Veyne provides continues in the seventh chapter, where the accent is on the fact that the Christian Constantine still remained the High Pontiff of the pagan rituals. On the one hand, Veyne explains, the Emperor helped the Christian Church to establish itself as freely and widely as possible: in conjunction with other decrees, in 321 Constantine legally introduced the day of Sunday rest. On the other hand, Constantine tolerated paganism and did not attempt to impose religious uniformity throughout his empire: an illustration of his commendable attitude are the reverse sides of his kingdom’s coins which, at least until 322, would combine images of pagan gods with other martial or symbolic figures. Rejecting Friedrich Vittinghoff’s

and other historians' contention that Constantine was a calculating politician who saw in Christianity the ideal metaphysical basis for the stability of his empire, Veyne underlines how the emperor, in his numerous writings, repeatedly calls himself God's servant and proposes to free his people from the superstitions of paganism. Furthermore, Veyne draws the enlightening comparison between Constantine and a modern minister of culture who would favour avant-garde artists over the conventional academicism usually preferred by the majority. 'Modernity mattered' to Constantine (and to his successors), and Christianity's energy and fresh comprehension of power could significantly improve the image of the monarchy (p. 62).

When Our World Became Christian will certainly attract readers interested in historical and religious studies as well as in the emergence of Western civilization. Yet Veyne's work does not restrict itself to providing an analysis of purely past events; in fact, its last two chapters tackle the crucial question of Christianity's significance for Europe and the Western world and are, in my view, the most thought-provoking ones. In chapter 10 Veyne persuasively opposes the somewhat widespread belief that ideological grounds were behind Constantine's conversion: indeed, Veyne shows that the monarchy did not necessarily need the heavenly God/earthly King equivalence in order to ensure its subjects' deference. Rather, it was the Christian Church that 'made use of the emperor' and of his charisma to proselytize (p. 131). The last chapter joins in very contemporary debates concerning Europe's Christian roots, debates which have recently involved Pope Benedict XVI and the European MPs working on Europe's Constitution. Though Veyne regards

Europe (and all other civilizations) as an entity too multifaceted and heterogeneous to have 'roots', he considers the Enlightenment as the actual father of modern Europe's faith in democracy and humanitarianism. Challenging the perhaps automatic assumption that Christianity was the 'natural' choice for the Western world in its early stages, Veyne concludes by saying that religion is but one of the multiple factors that constitute a society. As Veyne's book has vividly made clear throughout, without Constantine's conversion Christianity could have been a mere 'historical parenthesis' (p. 99).

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