

Notes on Quiz #9

History of Ancient Rome • Spring 2023

1. What do you think were Constantine's motivations for his policies toward Christianity?

A number of arguments could be made, but it should be remembered that the Christian church had become powerful throughout the empire during the third-century crisis, stepping in to help the people when the state could not. Christianity held universal appeal across class, ethnicity, and gender, and the church was deftly making use of the persecutions of Christians to venerate the victims as martyrs and saints. Christianity was a more and more formidable enemy; it would also be an equally powerful tool in the hands of the emperor himself. The Romans knew they had nothing to offer the provincials in terms of an identity-giving religion; the answer was the coopted Christianity, just as the Romans had coopted naval warfare from the Carthaginians, or the cult of the Magna Mater from Anatolia.

At the same time, it's also possible that Constantine saw hope and potential in the Christian god as such. Unlike pagan gods, he was not bound to place and powers; and the Jewish god was bound to a single nation. If the Christian god was real, he might well be more powerful than the other gods, and worthy of the adherence of the Roman emperor.

2. In your opinion, was Julian's apostasy (reverting the empire to paganism) doomed? Why or why not?

A number of arguments could be made, but consider this. After the legitimation of Christianity under Constantine and Constantius II, Julian attempted to reassert Greco-Roman paganism as the primary religion of the empire, largely out of personal conviction. His paganism was a strange mix of traditions that was outside the pagan mainstream, so that he had trouble rallying non-Christians to his support; as an ascetic, he removed himself from popular entertainment, alienating himself from the people of the cities.

Meanwhile Christianity was strongly organized even before Constantine, and was easily able to maintain its strength and reassert itself after Julian's death.

EC1. The Christian heresy which stated that Christ was not of the same substance as the Father was known as:

(a) Arianism

EC2. In what ways was the Empire of the fourth century different from that of the first or second centuries?

Most obviously, the empire was formally divided between east and west; perhaps more importantly, each empire was systematically organized by diocese and province, with infrastructure and a hierarchy of government officials. At the top of each empire, the tendency became for emperors to rule with junior-co-emperors, and with other members of the imperial family serving as regional Caesars.

All of this helped to stabilize the empire, strengthening its process both at the top and at the local level. The strengthening of the regions and provinces minimized the threat from provincial commanders and from barbarians beyond the frontiers, though the alliances with frontier tribes and reliance on them to defend the further reaches of the Roman world spelled eventual doom for the western empire.

The advent of Christianity as the favored and then official religion helped unite the empire in terms of identity, while at the same time providing a system of support parallel to the state's taking up the slack locally where the Romans fell short. At the same time, Christianity was politicized by the intrusion of the emperors and those around him, as witnessed from the beginning by Constantine presiding over the Nicene Creed. Christianity's official status also meant that the religion was made unified (Catholic) anyone not believing in the official creed could be persecuted for heresy, setting the stage for endless wars and martyrs on behalf of Catholic orthodoxy.