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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Hook: This is the classic question involving pragmatism and idealism; students' answers will vary depending on their socio-cultural background. Constantine provides an excellent example of a man who valued unity over truth, which proved disastrous for the Church.

Around the time Constantine was born, China had just seen the death of the Han dynasty. As recorded in Luo Guanzhong's epic, China experienced a series of civil wars from 169 to 280 over who would rule it. Beginning the topic of medieval history by discussing Chinese history may seem peculiar. But there is shared truth that Guanzhong captures quite well. History is cyclical. Periods of division are followed by periods of unification, and vice versa. There is war, and then there is peace. The names, faces, cultures, and people groups may change, but the pattern does not. European history and East Asian history share that same pattern. At the same time, it is clear that Europe and Asia have followed different paths. There is a disparate truth as well. Students key in on this quickly. Eventually, they ask the inevitable question: Why did Europe conquer and colonize the world, both territorially and culturally, and not Asia? Why did Europe industrialize and secularize first? What made Europe different? The answer, as I tell them, is found by starting at the beginning of Europe's history, with the first two themes that shape medieval Europe, Constantine (representing the greater civilization of Rome) and the Church.

QUESTIONS TO MARK FOR THE TEST

- **Key Terms:** 2, 3, 4
- **Key People:** 2
- **Comprehension Questions:** 3, 7, 9

CHAPTER 1

Constantine the Great: The New Rome and Christianity



Icon depicting the Council of Nicaea. Date and author unknown.

INTRODUCTION

Summative Statement: Provide a 1-2 sentence summary/main idea of the entire chapter.

Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, sought to reunite the Roman Empire and the Church through his actions, believing it to be a divine mandate for him to do so.

Summative Quote

"The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been." —Luo Guanzhong, opening lines of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Hook

What is more important in society: unity or truth? Explain your answer.

OVERVIEW

Constantinople (pp. 11-15)

- Constantine was proclaimed Caesar (Junior Emperor) by his troops at York in 306. With his father's death, Constantine walked into a divided Roman world. The empire had been split into East and West, with an emperor for each.
- In 312, Constantine defeated Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge. Unexpectedly, he attributed his victory to the Christian God and promptly converted.
- By 324, he had defeated all his rivals and became emperor of a reunited Roman Empire. By 330, he founded the new capital of the empire, later named Constantinople.
- Constantinople was founded because a better location was needed to coordinate defenses of the eastern frontier against Persian and possible barbarian incursions along the Rhine and Danube.

KEY TERMS: For each term, provide a 1-2 sentence definition.

1. Constantinople: the new capital of the Roman Empire, founded in the early fourth century (pp. 11-14)
2. *Lapsi*: those who had relapsed from Christianity under threat of persecution (p. 19)
3. *Traditor*: a bishop who surrendered the gospel books in exchange for his life (p. 19)
4. *Homousion* clause: meaning "same essence," it taught that Christ was of the same essence as the Father, thereby coequal and coeternal with the Father (p. 22)

KEY FIGURES: For each figure, provide a 1-2 sentence definition; make sure to include the person's relevance and major actions in the chapter.

1. Constantine: emperor of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century; he was the first Roman emperor to be Christian and intervened in numerous theological councils over doctrinal issues (pp. 11-23)
2. Arius: a priest of Alexandria who taught that Jesus was not fully God, but rather a created being (pp. 20-21)

KEY DATES: For each date, find and briefly explain what happened on that date.

1. 325: Council of Nicaea, which affirmed the idea that Christ and God the Father are both fully God and of the "same essence" (p. 21)

KEY STRUCTURES: For each key structure, provide a 1-3 sentence summary of how each changed, experienced alteration, or encountered difficulty.

1. Government: The Roman Empire, divided between two emperors, was reunited by Constantine; it also began to endorse Christianity.
2. Religion: Christianity, though undergoing persecution, became accepted by the Roman state under Constantine. It experienced doctrinal debates with the Donatist and Arian controversies.
3. Society: Educated pagans began to become suspicious and/or hostile toward Christianity's growing popularity.

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Christianity (pp. 14-16)

- More importantly, Constantine had converted to Christianity, the first emperor to do so.
- This provoked much opposition for the following reasons:
 - » Christianity was non-Roman and new.
 - » It was extreme in its claims, decreeing that there was only one God and that Christians were called to convert all peoples.
 - » It was popular among the Greeks, and regarding social classes, most popular among artisans and slaves. Members of the Roman senatorial class saw the lower classes as lesser than them.
 - » How could anyone believe that a man who was executed by a Roman governor was God?
 - » Christians often criticized the religious norms of Roman society or refused to participate in rituals such as worship of the emperor.
 - » Educated pagans, like Tacitus, saw them as dangerous to the safe functioning of the Roman state and society.
- Persecution was intermittent, with some emperors persecuting heavily and others being more lax. The Church often condemned voluntary or provoked martyrdom, but with mixed success.

Constantine and Christianity (pp. 17-25)

- Despite this environment of hostility, Constantine converted. Seeming to be a genuine convert, he was convinced that God had intervened at the battle of the Milvian Bridge. Constantine claimed that Christ had appeared to him in a vision, commanding him to make a banner based on a Christian monogram called the *labarum*.
- Constantine, knowing there was popular opposition, was not overbearing with his new religion. He often used the term "supreme divinity" instead of Christ, he was not baptized formally until he was on his deathbed, and he kept the imperial title of high priest, *pontifex maximus*.

- Byzantium, an old Greek colony that served as a commercial hub between Thracia and Turkey, was chosen as the site of the new capital.
 - » To furnish it, Constantine ransacked statues and artwork across Greece.
 - » Constantinople was built in the model of Rome, with a hippodrome (racetrack), seven hills, a forum, and a senate.
 - » However, it was built to be a Christian city, not a pagan one. Furthermore, it purposely cultivated a sense of imperial majesty, while old Rome had avoided it.
 - » The great purpose and function of the city was its strategic placement.
 - It controlled passage from Europe to Asia and from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean.
 - It served as a naval base to control the eastern Mediterranean.
 - It stood as a bulwark against Muslim invasions, protecting Western Europe, until 1453.

- Regarding the Church, Constantine saw it as his job to maintain unity and harmony in the Church. Just as he was charged with overseeing the empire, he believed God had charged him with the oversight of the Church.
- His first foray into the Church was the Donatist controversy. This controversy was over who should be Bishop of Carthage: Caecilian, a more Romanized African, or Donatus, a Numidian who was to be the next successor of Bishop Majorinus. The two were split over two issues. First, Caecilian was critical of voluntary or provoked martyrdom, while Donatus supported it. Second, the Donatists were critical of all *lapsi*, or those who had relapsed from Christianity under threat of persecution. Even worse was a *traditor*, a bishop who surrendered the gospel books in exchange for his life. Such a traitor was no longer bishop and should not be recognized as such. Donatus accused Caecilian of being a *traditor*, which he denied.
- Normally, a council of bishops in Africa would be summoned, but with no clear bishop, that was impossible. The Church of Rome had some sort of primacy, but the Donatists suspected the Church would side against them. Instead, they asked Constantine to step in.
- Constantine called for the Council of Arles in 314 and even oversaw another council in 316. The Donatists kept rejecting everyone else's decisions. Eventually, he banished the Donatists.
- The second foray was the Arian controversy. Beginning in 323, Alexandrian priest Arius proposed a controversial thought. If Christ was the Son of God, He must be younger than God the Father. In fact, Christ must have had a beginning; therefore, Christ is lesser than God the Father and not wholly God. Arius was excommunicated, but was skilled at gathering support from both bishops

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS: Answer each question as prompted; typical answers should range from 3-8 sentences, depending on the detail of the question.

1. Why was Constantinople primarily founded?
For the eastern half of the empire, a better location was needed to coordinate defenses of the eastern frontier against Persian and possible barbarian incursions along the Rhine and Danube. (pp. 11-12)
2. Compare and contrast the cities of Constantinople and Rome.
Constantinople was built in the model of Rome, with a hippodrome (racetrack), seven hills, a forum, and a senate. However, it was built to be a Christian city, not a pagan one. Furthermore, it purposely cultivated a sense of imperial majesty, while old Rome had avoided it. (pp. 12-14)
3. What was the great purpose and function of the city of Constantinople?
It controlled passage from Europe to Asia and from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and served as a naval base to control the eastern Mediterranean. (p. 14)
4. Why were Romans, especially of the educated class, opposed to Christianity?
Christianity was non-Roman and new. It was extreme in its claims, decreeing that there was only one God and that Christians were called to convert all peoples. It was popular among the Greeks, and regarding social classes, most popular among artisans and slaves. Members of the Roman senatorial class saw the lower classes as lesser than them, creating further tension. Next, how could anyone believe that a man who was executed by a Roman governor was God? Adding fuel to the fire, Christians often criticized the religious norms of Roman society or refused to participate in rituals such as worship of the emperor. Lastly, educated pagans, like Tacitus, saw them as dangerous to the safe functioning of the Roman state and society. (pp. 14-15)
5. Describe the persecution the Church experienced and how the Church responded.
Persecution was intermittent, with some emperors persecuting heavily and others being more lax. The Church often condemned voluntary or provoked martyrdom, but with mixed success because many regular Christians sought it out. (p. 16)

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and the common man, who loved his popular ballads and song phrases.

- Constantine saw Christendom splitting over the issue, and though he seemed to not be too particularly concerned with the deeper doctrinal implications, he did believe that he had to fix the problem. Fearing that God might bring His wrath if Constantine did not intervene or that civil war/disorder might break out, he summoned a general council of the whole Church (the first to be had) in 325 at Nicaea.
- Though his role and influence have been debated, Constantine supported the acceptance of the Nicene Creed, which stated that Christ and God the Father were *homoousion*, or "same essence." They both were fully and eternally God. He also supported the excommunication of the two bishops who refused to accept the creed.

6. Detail what drove Constantine to convert.

He was convinced that God had intervened at the battle of the Milvian Bridge. Constantine claimed that Christ had appeared to him in a vision, commanding him to make a banner based on a Christian monogram called the *labarum*. (pp. 16-17)

7. Explain Constantine's view of his role regarding the Church.

Regarding the Church, Constantine saw it as his job to maintain unity and harmony in the Church. Just as he was charged with overseeing the empire, he believed God had charged him with the oversight of the Church. (pp. 17-18)

8. Summarize the doctrinal divide within the Donatist controversy.

This controversy was over who should be Bishop of Carthage: Caecilian, a more Romanized African or Donatus, a Numidian who was to be the next successor of Bishop Majorinus.

The two were split over two issues. First, Caecilian was critical of voluntary or provoked martyrdom, while Donatus supported it. Second, the Donatists were critical of all *lapsi*, or those who had relapsed from Christianity under threat of persecution. Even worse was a *traditor*, a bishop who surrendered the gospel books in exchange for his life. Such a traitor was no longer bishop and should not be recognized as such. Donatus accused Caecilian of being a *traditor*, which he denied. (pp. 18-20)

9. Explain the doctrinal debate of the Arian controversy.

Beginning in 323, Alexandrian priest Arius proposed a controversial thought. If Christ was the Son of God, He must be younger than God the Father. In fact, Christ must have had a beginning; therefore, Christ is lesser than God the Father and not wholly God. Men like Athanasius supported the acceptance of the Nicene Creed, which stated that Christ and God the Father were *homoousion*, or "same essence." They both were fully and eternally God. (pp. 20-22)

only to conquer and unite the political world, but also the religious world. A newly converted Christian, Constantine believed it was his God-given duty to oversee the welfare of the Church. His actions with the Donatists and at Nicaea proved it. Though historians argue over exactly how much influence he had over Church decisions, it cannot be denied that he was present. And thus the first two themes that direct medieval history are unveiled: Rome and Christianity. The influence of the two cannot be understated. Roman law, government, philosophy, and ethics (with the addition of Greek thought) dictated the development of kingdoms and academies. Christian thought did much of the same. But the interaction between the two was even more titanic. As typified by Constantine, the Roman state (and its replacements) and the Christian Church began to meld; the two were not able to keep separate, for countless kings, nobles, bishops, and popes intervened in the respective spheres of influence of each other. Of course, students might point out that China was similar. It had a union of church and state, in many ways, throughout its history. But the words Constantine saw in the sky proved prophetic not only about him, but the greater state of Europe. Christianity, combined with Roman/Greek thought, formed a unique civilization.

- Though an apparent success, Constantine was later convinced by advisors to readmit Arius, who vaguely affirmed the creed. Athanasius, the major proponent of Christian orthodoxy, vehemently disagreed, but was exiled by Constantine for brewing further dissension.
- Overall, Constantine seemed to be more concerned with religious unity versus religious truth.

SUMMARY

"*In hoc signo vinces*," translated commonly as "In this sign you will conquer," were words that appeared to Constantine in the sky, with a Chi Rho cross, the night before the battle of the Milvian Bridge. Further, Christ told him to paint that sign on his soldiers' shields, and by doing so, all foes would fall before him. And they did. Constantine, by 324, was the sole ruler of a reunited Roman Empire. However, he sought not

CONCLUSION

Though Constantine had experienced triumph and though Europe was united, the great pattern would continue. The empire, briefly united, was to be divided soon due to the arrival of certain people groups, the third theme that shaped the development of medieval history. But out of chaos, unity would again spring.

10. What role did Constantine play in the Council of Nicaea?

Though his role and influence have been debated, Constantine supported the acceptance of the Nicene Creed, which stated that Christ and God the Father were *homoousion*, or "same essence." They both were fully and eternally God. Constantine also supported the excommunication of the two bishops who refused to accept the creed. (pp. 20-23)

11. Considering his overall actions toward the Church, what did Constantine seem to be concerned with? Explain.

Overall, Constantine seemed to be more concerned with religious unity than religious truth. He was willing to readmit Arius, who vaguely affirmed the creed, and even exiled Athanasius for disagreeing. Further, Constantine was willing to be vague about his language about religion, rather than to boldly proclaim he was a Christian. (Note: Some historians disagree with the author on this point. Others argue Constantine was quite open and clear with his support of Christianity.) (pp. 18-23)

SHORT ANSWER ESSAY QUESTIONS: Provide a short response in the range of 5-8 sentences.

Evaluate the authenticity of Constantine's vision.

Students, due to the skeptical nature of our culture, will most likely answer in the negative.

The main purpose of this question is to get them to think. To dismiss Constantine's claim automatically, as many of my students do, reveals their ingrained skepticism, a fact they are not even aware of. If they believe in more than just the natural world and that there is a supernatural realm, then they should at least be open to the possibility. But due to secularization, they often write it off immediately. This makes a good teaching moment.