

When God Abandoned Rome

By John L. Cooper III, Ph.D.. IX^o

Presented August 28, 2022

Fairfield Masonic Center

Fairfield, California

Paper Updated August 31, 2022

I. *Concerning* GOD and R ELIGION.

A *Mason* is oblig'd by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist nor an irreligious **Libertine**. But though in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is, to be *good Men and true*, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish'd; whereby Masonry becomes the *Center of Union*, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remain'd at a perpetual Distance.

Constitutions of 1723, James Anderson.

It might seem strange for a paper written for the *Masonic Rosicrucian Society* to begin with a reference to Article I of *The Charges of a Freemason* written by Dr. James Anderson in 1723, and adopted by the premier Grand Lodge (of London and Westminster) as a replacement for the *Old Charges* which had traditionally been read at the Making of a Mason in operative times. The *Masonic Rosicrucian Society* is, after all, a *Christian* Masonic order; but it is also a *Masonic* order, and the principles of Freemasonry are a part of the foundation of the society as well as the principles and teachings of Christianity. It is appropriate, therefore, to take a look at a time in the history of Christianity when it might have been closer to the ideals of Freemasonry as expressed in the *Constitutions of 1723*, but instead slipped into religious autocracy and bigotry in the space of just one hundred years. This is that story.

The Masonic Rosicrucian Society not only has a religious requirement for membership, but encourages the study of religion itself in many and varied ways. The subject of religion is not confined to Christianity itself, even though members of the society must be Christians. This study encompasses not only the beliefs and practices of religion, but also its history and its influence on the world in which it operates – and the influence of the world on religion in general, and on specific religions in particular. This paper is a study of the influence of the idea of a nexus

between religion and the political power of the state – not in general, but during the transformative ninety-eight years of the Fourth Century when Christianity became first a legitimate and tolerated religion in the Roman Empire, and then the sole legitimate religion of the empire.

First, some background. Christianity had spread from its origin in the Roman Province of Judaea throughout the Roman Empire. As Christianity began to separate from Judaism at the end of the first century C.E., it lost the toleration which had been extended to Judaism as exempt from certain religious requirements imposed on the rest of the inhabitants of the empire. Persecution of Christians, which had been sporadic at first had become an empire-wide pogrom against Christians by the middle of the third century C.E. The last major empire-wide persecution was that conducted under the Emperor Diocletian (r.284-305 C.E.). The persecution lapsed with the Edict of Serdica in 311 C.E., which was issued by the Emperor Galerius for the Eastern Roman Empire which he governed. It was confirmed in the Western Roman Empire by the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E., promulgated by the Emperor Constantine with the concurrence of his co-emperor, Licinius. It was thus during the Fourth Century that Christianity went from a persecuted religion, to a tolerated religion, and thence to the official religion of the Roman state by the end of the century. This paper is the story of the consequences of this progress, not only on Christianity and the Roman state itself, but on the understanding of history and the causes of that history.

The two dates chosen as the frame for this paper are A.D. 312 and A.D. 410 – the eighty-eight years of the Fourth Century from the Conversion of Constantine to Christianity in A.D.312 to the Sack of Rome in A.D. 410 by Alaric and the Visigoths. It is a story not only of the transformation of an outlawed and persecuted religion to the status of the sole state-supported religion of the Roman state, but of the crash of the assumption that the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the empire would forever protect Rome from destruction by its enemies. The sobering realization that things would not work so simply for the empire was also responsible for the writing of one of the great works of political philosophy by Bishop Augustine of Hippo, his classic work called The City of God. But first, some background in order to understand how the events unfolded which marked out this memorable century.

The beginning of the story starts not with Constantine, but with his predecessor, the Emperor Diocletian (reigned 284 A.D. – 305 A.D.). Diocletian was an administrator of superb abilities, and came to believe that the Roman Empire was too big to be governed by one man alone. He decided that there should be one emperor in each of the two divisions of the empire – one in the east and one in the west – and in order to stabilize the succession, there should be two “junior emperors” who would be waiting in the wings, so to speak, to assume the senior position when the senior emperor retired or died. The system was officially

launched while he was emperor, and its first real test came when he decided to retire in 305 A.D. It never really worked. Even before he died some six years after he retired, his two successor “co-emperors” fought a civil war, which was soon joined by the two “junior emperors.” One of the latter, who was eventually to become the sole emperor, was the man we know of in history as Constantine the Great. The story of how he became sole emperor is complex and lengthy, but by the year A.D. 325 he had mastered the rebellious factions in the empire, and was now the only head of the Roman state.

Although it took almost twenty years to become sole emperor, two events stand out which are worthy of note. The first was Constantine’s adoption of Christianity as his personal religion just before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312 A.D. The second was the official declaration of toleration of Christianity with the adoption of the Edict of Milan in 313. Although historians have many questions about this “edict,” including whether it ever actually took place as described in Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea, it is a convenient way to describe an important milestone that it represented: Christianity was not only on its way to becoming an officially accepted religion of the Roman Empire, but to becoming the sole legitimate religion of the state.

Constantine’s role in determining which of the many Christian factions and “churches” would be officially recognized by the empire often overshadows Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in 312 A.D. In A.D. 325 he called together bishops of the church to a council at his palace at Nicaea, in modern-day Turkey, where he insisted that they come up with a definition of Christianity that the government could use to determine which of the many Christian factions should receive public funding and support. The result was the famous Nicene Creed, or at least the first version of the creed, which is now a part of the liturgy of many churches today. But for purposes of this paper, the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in A.D. 312 was more important, because it advanced the idea that the emperor’s personal connection with God - or with the “god” of whichever religion he had decided to follow – would be a necessary condition not only for his success as emperor, but for the success of the Roman Empire itself. Romans had long believed that the favor of the gods was essential to the success of the Roman state, and so the transfer of this belief to Christianity was not far-fetched. If Christianity was the “true” religion of God, then the worship of this God by the state would guarantee His favor for the empire itself as well as for the emperor. The nexus of “Church and State” had been born.

Because of the magnitude of the reign of Constantine the Great and its influence on subsequent history is so great, it is easy to ignore the rest of the Fourth Century after his death in A.D. 337. But there was more to the developing story of Christianity and the Roman state, and the story did not stop with the death of Constantine. Three of his sons succeeded him as emperor, and his nephew

succeeded the three of them. Another three emperors followed, but in 379 A.D. Theodosius seized power, and presided over the next events of significance for this story. Known as Theodosius the Great, he was the one responsible for the triumph of Nicene Christianity at the expense of rival churches, and for the final and official merging of the Roman state with the Christian Church, or more specifically, with the churches adhering to Nicene orthodoxy. While the struggle for Nicene supremacy was not yet over, Theodosius was instrumental in the merger of “church and state” until the advent of the Enlightenment in the 18th century brought this arrangement into question.

Theodosius called together the bishops of the church for another ecumenical council at Constantinople in A.D. 381 (the first ecumenical council was that of Nicaea in 325 A.D.) to resolve the ongoing controversy between the two leading theological contentions within the church, that of the “Trinitarian” supports of the Nicene Creed, and that of the Arians. The former insisted that all three persons of the Trinity were of the same substance, or in other words, all three persons were “God” and always had been from the beginning of time. The Arians held a different view as to the nature of the Second Person of the Trinity (Jesus) as having come into existence at a later time than the First Person of the Trinity (God the Father). The council gave the victory in the argument to the former, and the best statement of this theological position can be found in a formulation called the “Athanasian Creed.”

As important as the Council of Constantinople was, it was not nearly as important for the purposes of this paper as what happened the year before. Plagued by the ongoing controversy between the Trinitarians and the Arians (as he saw it), Theodosius decided to put an end to the political turmoil roiling his empire by issuing an edict that would firmly place the state on the side of what he called “orthodoxy.” On February 27, A.D. 380, he issued the Edict of Thessalonica which condemned the beliefs of those who did not adhere to “orthodoxy” and the Nicene Creed version of Christianity as “foolish madmen,” and authorized the state to punish them for their beliefs. Here is an English translation of the Edict of Thessalonica:

It is our desire that all the various nations which are subject to our Clemency and Moderation, should continue to profess that religion which was delivered to the Romans by the divine Apostle Peter, as it has been preserved by faithful tradition, and which is now professed by the Pontiff Damasus and by Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic holiness. According to the apostolic teaching and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe in the one deity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity. We order the followers of this law to embrace the name of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious

name of heretics, and shall not presume to give to their conventicles the name of churches. They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority which in accordance with the will of Heaven we shall decide to inflict.

There were consequences of this edict¹:

- In January, 381 “heretics” were forbidden to settle in the cities of the empire.
- In 381 the proconsul of Asia (western Turkey today) was ordered to deliver all the churches in his province to Nicene bishops, expelling any bishop that was a “heretic.”
- In 383 Theodosius required all non-Nicene “sects” to deliver to him a written copy of their “creeds.” He burned almost all of them as “heretical.”
- Non-Nicene Christians were forbidden by law to assemble in their “churches,” forbidden to ordain priests, and forbidden to spread their beliefs to others.
- Priscillian, the non-Nicene Bishop of Ávila, in Spain, was arrested and executed by the state.

Recalling that the identification of the emperor with the state, and the prosperity, if not the safety of the state, was identified with the personal “god” of the emperor, this oration delivered in A.D. 363 by the Court Orator, Themistius about the Emperor Jovian could just as well have been said about the Emperor Theodosius:

‘The emperor is the living law, divine law descended from on high, incarnation in time of the Eternal God, emanation of its nature, Providence on earth, in constant contemplation of God, chosen to be his present reflection, in brief, true son of Zeus, raised up by Zeus, and sharing with Zeus his array of titles’²

It now is obvious that Christianity is no longer a separate entity from the Roman state, and cannot exist except at the will and pleasure of the emperor. The merger of “church and state” has become complete.

For Christians in the empire in the years after the accession of Theodosius as emperor in A.D. 379 the proof that Christianity was the “true religion,” and that Theodosius’ Nicene Creed orthodox church was the “true religion” was confirmed by the last battle that Theodosius fought and won: The Battle of the Frigidus River, fought on September 5-6, A.D. 394. The army of Theodosius the Great defeated the army of the rebel general Eugenius, confirming that the religion of Theodosius was the “true religion” endorsed by God. All was well now in the Roman Empire, and the future safety of the Roman state was now guaranteed. The harsh decrees of the

¹ Boyd, William K., The Ecclesiastical Edicts of the Theodosian Code, New York: Columbia University Press, ©1905 (Kindle Edition), *passim*.

² Freeman, Charles, A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans, and the Christian State, The Overlook Press (Kindle Edition), p. 12.

Edict of Thessalonica were justified because it was obvious that God was pleased with what was going on. Is any other proof needed?

Or not. Theodosius died in January, A.D. 395. Fifteen years later, a Visigothic army attacked the City of Rome, devastating it. The ancient capital of the Roman Empire, which had not experienced a foreign invasion for 800 years, fell to the barbarian army of Alaric the Goth.

The historian H. A. Drake describes the consequences thus:

“Ever since Constantine’s battlefield miracle in 312, Christians had pointed to the power of their God to help those who worshipped him with a pure faith, and only fifteen years earlier Theodosius I had demonstrated once again the awful power of that deity at the Frigidus River. Barely twenty years had passed since the same emperor had made Christ the official God of the Roman Empire. But this time no divinely appointed champion rode forth against Alaric, nor did some pious leader achieve a miracle that destroyed the enemy. If any celestial signs were seen or dramatic battlefield prayers uttered in the summer of 410, they went unrecorded, and evidently unheeded. By the standards of the day, Alaric’s victory amounted to a complete and utter failure of the Christian God to do his job.”³

Indeed. The result, however, was not the displacement of Christianity by another religion. Christianity survived, and the reason, perhaps more than any other, is that there was really no alternative. The collapse of the Roman state in the west left only the bishops, and especially the Bishop of Rome as the only real authority to hold society together.

But this is not the end of the story. Out of the Sack of Rome in the year 410 A.D. came a seminal work which has influenced not only the rest of Christian history to this day, but also the world of political philosophy. Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis was born in A.D. 354 and died in A.D. 430. Of Berber origin, he was Bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa – then a province of the Roman Empire. He was converted to Christianity in A.D. 386, and from that point forward became a powerful protagonist of the Christian Faith. As the Western Roman Empire began to disintegrate, he picked up the torch of Christianity, firmly convinced that Christianity was not the cause of the demise of the Roman Empire, but its salvation.

Augustine is a saint in the liturgical calendar of the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as that of the Church of England, and its American counterpart, the Episcopal Church. His feast day is celebrated on August 28 each year, and even the Lutheran Church honors him on this day in its

³ Drake, H. A., A Century of Miracles, Oxford: Oxford University Press (Kindle Edition), p. 200.

calendar. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes him as a “Doctor of the Church,” a “Teacher of the Church” among a select few with that title.

Although St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and his work *On the Trinity* are important expressions of his religious philosophy, his *The City of God* is his magnum opus. This work not only established his position as a major theologian of Christianity, but this book is still a foundational work in political philosophy, read as a part of the curriculum of political science in most major universities today. And it was this latter work that explained how God had not abandoned the Roman Empire in A.D. 410 with the Sack of Rome, but rather had disciplined the Roman Empire to cease its reliance on human power to retain its pre-eminence as a political state, but needed to turn to God – and his appointed emissaries, the bishops – as the sole support of the political state of the future.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the consequences of the transition of Christianity from a persecuted religion to the sole official religion of the Roman state by the end of the Fourth Century were momentous. One version of Christianity – Nicene Christianity – triumphed, and all other versions were suppressed. This suppression of other versions of Christianity also resulted in the suppression of knowledge, and the subsequent domination of one set of religious ideas over and against all others. The Fourth Century ushered in a thousand years of intellectual rigidity that only began to break apart during the Renaissance of the Fifteenth Century. The religious pluralism within Christianity today would have been unthinkable – and actually illegal – during those thousand years which came into existence with the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 C.E. And it is equally likely that a society dedicated to the study of religion, such as the Masonic Rosicrucian Society, would never have come into existence had this thousand-year reign of one version of Christianity continued to be not only the only legal version of Christianity, but the concept of the freedom to study all religions would not be the prerogative of such a society to this day.

Selected References

- Augustine, Aurelius, *The City of God*, Translated by Marcus Dods, with an Introduction by Thomas Merton, New York: The Modern Library. (Original published in Latin in 426 A.D.)
- Brown, Peter, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- Brown, Peter, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christiana Empire*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.
- Drake, H. A., *A Century of Miracles: Christians, Pagans, Jews and the Supernatural*, Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Drake, H. A., *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

- Fox, Robin Lane, Augustine: Conversions to Confessions, New York: Basic Books, 2015.
- Freeman, Charles, A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans and the Christian State, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Freeman, Charles, The Closing of the Western Mind: The Rise of Faith and the Fall of Reason, Penguin Random House, 2005.
- Freeman, Charles, A New History of Early Christianity, Yale University Press, 2011.
- MacCullough, Diarmaid, Christian History: An Introduction to the Western Tradition, SCM Press, 2012.
- MacCullough, Diarmaid, Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years, Allen Lane, 2009.