
CHRISTIANITY AS CENTRALITY OR PERIPHERISATION IN EUROPE CONSTANTINE THE GREAT'S ECCLESIAL MODEL, OR THE MAASTRICHT MODEL?†

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Abstract

The chosen topic is an analytical comment on the situation of Christianity, since the time of its liberation by Constantine the Great until the post-Maastricht period, when it is marginalised. My aim is to outline an analysis of free Christianity during the Constantinian period, with its shorts and overs, and eventually to expound a viewpoint with respect to the situation of contemporary Christianity. The ecclesial freedom provided by the Edict of Mediolanum involved the institutional liberation of Christianity, but the quality of spiritual life has not fully depended on the liberty of the Church. Unfortunately, the aspect of the Christian Church as an institution has gradually begun to be emphasized, to the detriment of that of the Church as event. The history of Christianity has been marked by the highs and lows of the liberties of an ecclesial institution more or less aware of its Christic calling.

Today Christianity is facing another challenge: the European peripherisation and missionary competition of other religions, oftentimes with fundamentalist notes. Christ no longer has centrality of value in the European globalist-consumerist society. The consequences of this situation can be seen in this short analysis.

Keywords: consumerism, politics, globalisation, Islam, syncretism

1. The world seen as Christo-centric history and its spiritual awareness

The world, in most of its part, has a *Christocentric history*, at least in its chronological development. *Christocentrism* has several meanings. Dane C. Ortlund talks about 'Hermeneutical Christocentrism', 'Salvation-historical Christocentrism', 'Evangelistic Christocentrism', 'Sanctifying Christocentrism' [1]. The Christian Church has had both an institutional development and phenomenological one, two elements that must be harmonized in order to create a genuine mission in the world. The presence of the Church at the *reference*

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point (point zero) of history meant a calling for the world to become aware of its holiness, value and mission. Christ enters history to save the world, but also to make it aware of its spiritual calling.

Spiritual awareness is the key term of the Christian vocation. Throughout history, Christians have proved how aware, or unaware, of this calling they have been. Historical development has confirmed the idea that the Church has always had a dual dimension: that of an *administrative and legal clerical institution*, on the one hand, and that of a *spiritual event or phenomenon*, on the other. The terms ‘event’ or ‘phenomenon’ do not seem to me to describe clearly enough this dimension of the ecclesial depth. We might rather speak about the idea of *experiencing Christ*, or *living in Christ*, in order to describe the serving of the Church.

Up to Saint Constantine the Great, the development of the Church had been rather a phenomenological one, of living in Christ, than that of an administratively organized institution. I believe such an institutionalized structure would not even have been possible during an age of persecution. The apostles conveyed the message of Christ by *living* and not by *dogmatizing*. The pagan world met with the Gospel by experiencing it, in its missionary expression, not by a strictly administrative organization. Christianity was a *leaven of life*, which fermented the world. Amazed by Christian morality, by the full equality among people, by the courage to speak the truth and to bear martyrdom for it, the pagans were enthusiastic about the new spiritual living. Their first impact with Christianity was not with the institution or the doctrine, but *the visual contact with the life in Christ*. And the apostles were saying the same thing: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have touched, of the Word of life (...) we proclaim to you, so that you also may have fellowship with us” (1 John 1.1-3).

Indeed, the joy was complete. Life in Christ created the joy of the meeting between God and man. The entire pre-Constantinian period meant an *authentic life in Christ*, a mission through *empathy*, through the apostolic paradigm, as required by the Lord: “So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5.16). Some might say that there was also the phenomenon of the ‘*lapsi*’, of abandoning Christianity for fear of persecution. Precisely in this lies the value of Christianity, which was represented by a spiritual elite: Christianity had to face the *either-or* dilemma: either with the free pagan world, but without Christ, or with Christ in prison and a free soul. This was the watershed. The force of love and cohesion of the Christian minority, which was only a core of people in each city, was based on the crazy love of God, a love understood by many as a *folly of the cross* (1 Corinthians 1.18). “God does not command, but He invites, He calls ... The decrees of tyrants are received with a dull resistance; the Lord’s invitation to the feast is received with joy by those who have ears to hear.” [2] For the Roman social ‘normality’, the love of Christ was really mad, because one could not understand how young people could so easily renounce their lives for the sake of an ideal so weird. There was then, as there is now, a hedonistic vision of life that

made one try to live fully life's empirical joys. Any waiver of life was considered *insane*.

But that was when *the folly of the cross* gave the most wonderful period in the entire history of Christianity. It was only then that one could truly understand what the phrase *communion-communication-Eucharist* really meant. The Eucharistic feeling ran deep; it was not merely ritualistic and cultic. "The unity of the many in the Son of God is primarily and obviously related to the divine Eucharist", says theologian Ioannis Zizioulas [3]. Today, losing this living relationship, missing the rhythm of the Holy communion with Christ, for example, is not seen as a tragedy any more. At most, it is the punitive gesture of a more rigorous priest or bishop, an adept of *akriveia*. Moreover, some people consider it a kind of *religious masochism of a monastic type*. Man remains unmoved at this gesture today. But during the pre-Constantinian period, to be excluded from receiving communion meant a great emotional pain, because Christ was a *real presence*, an event of the human soul, not a rigid institution, uptight in its rituals.

Based on this authentic life, pre-Constantinian Christianity was the leaven of a new society and a new mentality. The anger of the persecuting Caesars, from Nero to Diocletian, did nothing but expand the *Christic leaven* in the dough of the pagan world. At that time paganism had fallen into ridicule. The Greek-Roman world was infused, on the one side, with sensual-fecundity cults of Mesopotamian origin. Aphrodite had acquired the image of Ishtar in the Persian religion. In his time, Elijah struggled with nearly a thousand priests of Baal and Astarte (Asherah, Inanna, Ishtar, etc.), showing the people that it was the heavenly fire which could prove the genuine divine presence, and not the fire of sensuality which had defiled all the hills of the Holy Land. Elder Theophanes also insists on the 'pneumatic fire' when analysing the expression "do not put out the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5.19) [4].

On the other hand, another pagan religion had appeared, 'frozen into an institution' which had turned religious feeling into rigid obedience towards the imperial figure. It was the famous *cult of the emperor*, which required all Roman citizens to perform the gesture of total obedience to the emperor, through worship, incense and invocation prayers before his statue.

There were also the meaningless cults of hundreds of statues in the Pantheon or the Areopagus. No one granted these cults any religious depth any longer, they were rather ritual gestures expressing social solidarity, as the ancient society regarded religious observance as a form of community association and a token of social status. One could not be an authentic citizen unless one also observed such a cult.

2. The 'Constantine the Great' moment in the life of the Christian Church

Saint Constantine the Great appeared in history when the Christian ferment had become increasingly evident. Christianity no longer was a mere Jewish sect, nor was it a Judeo-centrist movement that the 'prompters' of the

imperial house and the senators would sabotage by any means, asking for its eradication. Christians were people of great integrity, defined by dignity, truth and seriousness. Constantine appears as a *liberator of Christianity*, being in fact the one who gives legal recognition to the obvious: the existence on the Roman territory of a belief very different from those already present, a community where faith was genuine, which enhanced social consciousness and gave it a new structure, with specific reference to the metaphysical.

Unfortunately, after the freedom granted by Constantine, a perfect harmony and collaboration between the two dimensions of ecclesiology – the institution and the Christic event – was not always accomplished. Supported by the imperial house, the Church began to copy and emulate the model of the lay, worldly society in the organization and management of its structure. Surely there was a need for a visible, outward form of manifestation of Christian community life, which had for centuries manifested itself rather timidly, most often secretly, in the catacombs. Another argument brought as an answer was that *the Church deserves that which is best and most beautiful*. The splendid image of an institution which was growing stronger and stronger often led to State-Church or emperor-patriarch rivalry. Who was higher? The emperor or the patriarch? This question was the cause of a hidden, yet permanent cleavage between the two chairs.

Probably on this ground was also born the competition between the two patriarchal thrones: of the old and of the new Rome. Because there was no one else to be regarded as the *head of the city* of Rome, they turned to the pope, who became a kind of an *imperator ecclesiasticus*. The way he tried to present himself in public, to lead the Church and to be perceived by Western Europeans, proves that the man of the Church had also become a politician. In other words, the *homo ecclesiasticus* and the *homo politicus* overlapped. After 330 A.D. (the year Constantinople was established as an imperial capital), the ecclesiastical institution in the West became a political and religious capital at once. Therefore, the mission of the bishop of Rome became both political and religious at the same time, a fact which is certified by the investiture controversies.

3. Two parallel ecclesiologies

Competing with the pope, although unrivalled, Eastern ecclesiology will develop in its turn its institutional cult, giving it an unprecedented lustre. Perhaps the Byzantine emperors considered it as an image recovery for the Eastern Church, so that it should be put into a bright light from an institutional perspective, as it had been persecuted for a long time; and after the Edict of Milan there began an image competition with the Church of Rome. Therefore, the cultic pomp began to develop, but permanently connected to the liturgical, biblical and doctrinal symbolism. The bishop became the symbol of Christ's splendour in the service of the Divine Liturgy.

It was not infrequently that also in the Orthodox area the Christ-centred idea of liturgical grandeur was lost, and the bishop-centred mentality appeared instead, so that the entire service at the altar came to be oriented towards the presence of the high priest, and not towards the sacred presence of the slain Lamb. In *The Way of the Ascetics: The Ancient Tradition of Discipline and Inner Growth*, Tito Colliander says: “a natural condition of unity in love is that no one should rule: neither laymen nor priests, neither bishops nor patriarchs should decide on anything in the Church, without the consent of the whole Church. Faith is revealed to the simple, not to the clever minded. So the bishop learns from the peasant, the teacher from the child, the child from the bishop ...” [5]

The true Master kenotically sits on the altar table, an example of devoutness and humility. The focus must be on Him, and on Him only. All the rest are, as the Saviour says, “unworthy servants, we have only done our duty” (Luke 17.10). Nevertheless, the Orthodox world managed far better the relationship between *the sacred* and *the secular*, between the *imperator* and the *episcopus*. When the emperor proclaimed himself *episcopus ad extra*, the Church and politics had a well-defined and clear relationship. The emperor tried to ensure tranquillity outside the Church, so that it could peacefully fulfil its pious mission, of praying for the good of the country. The Church is macrocosmical, covering the whole world, and its purpose is to *convert the Creation to Christ*, so that *the entire world should become an ecclesial place*. This is why Christ demonstrates countless times that His coming is not aimed just at the Hebrews, but at “every man that cometh into the world”. The Canaanite woman, the centurion, the robbers, etc. are all, along with the Jews, in the Saviour’s mission area.

Obviously, there were also *genuine in-depth conversions*, which preserved the aura of the ancient Christian martyrs of the pre-Constantinian period. Some of them would establish great monastic and ascetical centres, others would be excellent theologians serving the Church in the empire’s *polises*, while still others would become the mass of devout followers giving substance to the Christian Church. Romanians are an example of such a conversion which has no date of Christian birth, not connected to any leader. This conversion to Christianity was a normal evolutionary process, taken for granted, without any coercive constraint.

Nonetheless, the lack of Christian maturity will determine some of the great Church hierarchy of the West, and even of the East, to compete against the royal houses, which will result in a lower quality of Christ’s message and of the ecclesiastical phenomenology, and in an increased pyramidal institutional power. The Church will vacillate between the deep, real life in Christ, and the formalist shallowness of stilted institutionalism. The quarrel for investiture, the disjunctions between the imperial throne and the patriarchal see, with their known consequences (expulsions, anathemas, depositions or exiles), altered the image significantly, and generated great credibility deficits of both the Western and the Eastern Church. Even today we still endure these worldly vanities, canonically well-reasoned by dogmas. Let me give just one example: the inter-

Orthodox disputes (mediated by the Catholics in Ravenna) had, as their canonical theme, who should be on top of the Orthodox diaspora in the West, i.e. who should have the highest rank (?!?). In other words, *a quarrel about words*, as Saint Paul calls it (2 Timothy 2.14), and not a genuine concern for missionary depth in a secularized, desacralized Europe.

However, the Orthodox Church still had the dignity not to turn its missionary program into politics. Consequently, throughout the Byzantine era, and especially after the fall of Constantinople, Eastern Christianity only assumed the role of *a confessor of politics, an advisor to the royal court*, but never that of *a political representative*. Therefore, Orthodoxy has always had great credibility, because it assumed its *Christological* mission: the salvation of souls and achieving of eternity. Obviously, the life of the *polis* has been part of the sphere of concern of the Eastern Church, but *the Ecclesia has never become a political Areopagus*.

The West, with its inclination towards the legal side, attempted a combination between the ecclesiastical and the political, which sometimes led to the confusion of thrones (papal or imperial). Perhaps the Western world allowed for such a conception, since *vicarius Christi* had in the meantime also become *vicarius imperatoris*. However, the overlap of the two phrases led to not so fortunate consequences for the Church of Rome. Let us take for example the Moorish presence in Spain, which lasted over 700 years (722-1492 A.D.), and created two mentalities. On the one side there were the Muslim conquerors, on the other – the Christian subjects. After the full liberation from the Moors in 1492 A.D., by joining forces, the two united kingdoms of Castile and Aragon began a wide-ranging national and religious rebirth of Spain, which resulted in an energetical coming back of Catholicism. The *Reconquista* made use of the Inquisition: whoever was not a Christian, either had to convert to Christianity, or to leave the country, or else he faced the consequences of betraying the faith. The image of the pogroms, which were not actually initiated by the Catholic Church (but involved her in the trials), led to a culpability which still weighs heavily on the Vatican today. And this is because the Vatican was also involved in the religious politics of returning to the Christian faith in Spain.

Another example is the Reformation, which divided Europe in two, not only religiously, but also politically. The Hundred Years' War, the fights against the Huguenots, the War of the Roses, the Thirty Years' war, etc., all portrayed an Europe in religious and political turmoil and convulsions. What was the consequence of such political and religious conflicts? With the dawn of modernity and the Enlightenment, the Church was gradually pushed into a back seat in the political and social scenery, rightly or wrongly accused of having been the cause of so many atrocities in the history of Europe and beyond. That is exactly what Christ never wanted.

4. The Anti-Christian Campaign in the European Society

Today, the anti-Church campaign continues, the Church being held accountable for all the causes of human suffering. The third millennium Europe tries to recant Christianity, and consequently, it eliminates the *Christian idea* from the culture, history and social anthropology of the European individual, making him a *freethinker*, 'free' from any moral norm. The laws of the United Europe do not enhance the axiological awareness of society; they only *train the consumer mentality of the individual*. Their aim is to standardize the collective mind, in order to make it accept the laws passed in Brussels, not in all conscience, but for fear of their consequences. While hyperbolically speaking of *the traditions of the European countries which must be respected*, the third millennium Europe promotes a levelling out of all values, thus inflicting a sort of *Procrustean bed* in terms of thinking, morality and religion. Especially where religion is concerned, there is a demand for both the term and the experience to become inward oriented and totally private, in the sense that no one should outwardly express their religious feelings within their socio-professional communities any longer. How far are we today from the calling of man as highlighted by Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: "Your glory, Christ, is man, whom you have established as the poet of Your radiance" [*Carminum Liber II. Historica*, P.G. 37, col. 1327, 25].

The consequences of this lack of interest in the sacred values are hard to imagine. Despite his scientific evolution, man still seeks a religious cure, and if he is denied the *Christian idea* in the united Europe, he will turn to individual 'spiritualities', be they pre- or para-Christian. In other words, his religion will become what the Germans call '*Privat sache*' (a 'private issue'), giving him the illusion of an individual or 'private' faith. Once religion is privatized, the Revelation is abolished. God did not reveal Himself individually, for one man or one nation, but for the entire humankind, even if He used a certain human being or a certain people for this purpose. In its spatial and temporal scope, the world is the receiver of the Revelation, subsequently subsumed into the doctrine, morals and cult of the genuine Church. The individualization of faith means the denial of the Revelation, and therefore of the Church, on the principle: 'each one believes what he wants'.

According to this principle, we have come to witness thousands of religious beliefs and practices, the revitalization of paganisms, 'humanistic' religions in which the name of 'God' has disappeared and only 'man' remains (yet: "where God is absent, man cannot exist either") [2, p. 66], perhaps along with the neutral designation of 'the sacred' at the very most. Father Dumitru Staniloae supports the idea that man is a seeker of the sacred, because "he is an existence which knows itself to be incomplete". Man desires "a relationship with the absolute" [6].

The European Council does not seem to be interested in the spiritual side of the citizens of the old continent. It is as if they wish for this axiological and religious confusion to persist, because they know that, when people no longer

heed the common set of values, when the human community becomes nothing but a set of statistical individuals without any faith, or with countless individual beliefs and confused moral elements, then any non-value, any abnormality can be promoted; because there is no unitary voice any longer, to approve or disapprove of these things. Based on these ideas, the minority movements deviating from morality are 'at work'. They are proposing another type of 'morality' (the homosexual one), another type of 'normality' (the open, amoral or immoral society), and another type of religion (individual, 'humanistic').

Given this reversal of values, there is another emergent phenomenon: *religious chaos and the relative morality*. In the context in which the European world, having evolved along the Maastricht, Lisbon and Brussels coordinates, is losing its Christian axiological coordinates, the European man will still seek a sacral connection. In this shortage of reference points, religious variations will proliferate just like in a 'spiritual hypermarket'. Specifically, the nostalgic Celt living in the third millennium United Kingdom will be provided with *energy offers from Stonehenge*; the German with a Pre-Christian mentality will be offered *spiritual guidance of the Valhalla type*; the consumer who toys with Oriental beliefs will be supplied with *yoga offers* in accordance with the behavioural and moral typology of each individual (Raja yoga, Hatha yoga, Laya yoga, Tantric yoga, Mantra yoga etc.). Nowadays, European ashrams are proposing *spiritual panacea*, while avoiding to admit that the idea of 'soul' is almost inexistent in this religious thinking, since the term 'atman' cannot be translated as 'soul'.

Finally, united Europe is facing today a phalanx of battle and discipline, the Islamic force. Their number increases and they enjoy all the European rights, since the laws of Western countries have granted them easy access to the EU citizenship, while Christian peoples which have founded Europe are still not welcome, or are only partially accepted into the much desired space (see the Schengen dispute). *The old colonialism takes its revenge*. The greed to possess as many vital spaces in the world as possible has turned into a mechanism for delivering new citizens, who do not have, however, the submissive and obedient mentality of the Christian, but are Islamists devoted to the cause of Mohammed, i.e. Islamic universalism. We all know the cases of journalists who, thinking that they can amuse themselves by mocking Islam, as they had been doing with Christianity for so long, paid with their lives for their attempts to belittle the religious mentality of these devotees, who claim equality regarding their citizenship with any European-born native. Islam becomes a challenge for Europe, and the solution is hard to find. Muslims have become citizens with full rights, same as any French, English or German one. There is a huge difference between the tolerance of Christianity and the rigidity of Islam, which the European in Brussels pretends not to see. Europe no longer has a pro-Christian vision, because of all the pressure and accusations of certain "minorities", which are encouraged to become more and more vocal and loud, claiming that they have no freedom to express or manifest themselves, that they are oppressed by Christian moral or doctrinal conceptions, etc. The indifferent or anti-Christian

attitude of today's European will cost him dearly. More specifically, his children will either be victims to an axiological disorientation with possible neuropathological consequences, or they will be subject to cruel religions, imposing a rigid discipline that will give them no right of freedom, such as the Christian world is doing today.

5. Genuine Christianity – the only form of response to the post-Maastricht Europe

Christianity, in its genuine, Christ-centred form, represents a *paradigmatic faith*. No one is forced to join Christianity today or not. *Christianity is proposed, not imposed*. It is offered by example, empathy or feeling. Genuine Christianity has a great asset: it is a *religion embracing the other*, it is *alterity-oriented*. Our neighbour is not annihilated, but on the contrary, he is given a unique existential value, which may be defined as an *existential hapax*, a creational uniqueness, which, due to its diversity, becomes complementary to the entire creation. Each human being represents a creational complementarity. Therefore, the world needs each and every human being, each and every creational entity, however different, because the Creator's harmony is presented through the entire cosmic image. It is the call of the human freedom: "The Spirit cannot work unless we have freedom" [7].

The fact that Europe has eliminated the presence of the Christian Church as a partner of dialogue and social analysis proves the level of spiritual disfigurement reached by the post-Maastricht consumer society. The fact that, in the field of education, they are asking for the elimination of Theology departments from European universities testifies for the historical amnesia of this society which, with its own hands, is tearing up its own roots from the soil of European history. Those who forget their past deny their own existence. We forget the fact that almost all European universities started from the theological education in the Middle Ages. The great *Alma maters* are the product of the theological culture of the early Middle Ages. Erasing them from the European academic space indicates superficiality in the analysis of the past and an obtuse denial of future perspectives. In the absence of Christianity, the European man becomes a '*fressende Mensch*', a *homo oeconomicus*, a *homo consumis*, or a *homo sistemis*, leading eventually to the so-called *homo comodis*. The 'man-of-comforts' is the one who does not want to be disturbed from his comfort. But Christianity is a sort of *discomfort of consciousness*, demanding him who has assumed Jesus Christ to reach the concrete essence of Paul's statement: "It is no longer me who live, but the Christ Who lives within me".

6. Conclusions

As a conclusion to the above: if post-Maastricht Europe neglects or sabotages Christianity, its future looks bleak. The population will be divided in three categories: on the one hand, groups of religious people, without any

authentic moral or spiritual base; on the other hand, a very compact group of intransigent and intolerant religious people, ready to punish any joke on behalf of their beliefs. A final, third category will be formed by those who have nothing sacred in them, living biologically, hedonistically, without any axiological existence, with only one vision: to reach the top of the social pyramid at any cost. This is the expression of social egoism, with severe consequences. Therefore, we will either have a Europe of non-values, morally speaking, or an intransigent, intolerant one, with legal systems doubled by tough religious constraints.

Genuine Christianity has always proposed an *aurea mediocritas*, a middle way marked by love and authenticity. Therefore, this Christianity should be supported, because it is the only one creating that bond of love so necessary for the society of the third millennium. Post-Maastricht Europe is a space of probabilities. More specifically, we will live in a state of disquieting uncertainty, unless we recover the European axiological elements, those which have provided consistency to this space, once so spiritual and moral, today immoral and pseudo-religious. The world needs imitative values. The multimedia information net is too full of fake models, and the European man, disoriented by the aggressive publicity, imitates them, living his life in deceit. Jesus Christ remains the only model that does not deteriorate throughout historical evolution. He is the only landmark or reference of sanctity and morality, as One who projects our existence not into the ephemeral, but in the transcendental communion of the creation with God. Only through Christ-the Man, the European individual of nowadays can still recover the pulse of genuine values, that of a person in dialogue, in search of other grace-bearing *prosopons*, through whom he can receive and offer the divine grace that comes from the liturgical space, from the Eucharistic liturgy turned cosmic.

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