

(1) While most scholars attempt to view the "conversion of Constantine" as a crux, a turning point in the transition from the ancient world to the medieval world, no agreement on the definition of any of the terms of the discussion exists. (2) Where some will date the conversion from the vision before the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, others focus on the Edict of Milan in 313, still others on Constantine's leadership at the Council of Nicea in 325, and some emphasize Constantine's deathbed baptism in 337. (3) Still more, it is impossible to find any agreement on what is to be regarded as the definitive sign of a change from late Roman society to medieval society. (4) Thus my discussion of the problem of the significance of the conversion of Constantine for periodization of European history will necessarily hinge on a consideration of each of the terms of the proposition.

(5) As for conversion itself, one must relate an evaluation of the religious and political import of any such occurrence to the general pattern of late classical culture and intellectual values. (6) Cumont has emphasized that salvation, ecstatic and mystical inspiration, and a personal saviour were propounded by Mithraism and a number of other mystery cults as well. (7) Among these last, one—the cult of the unconquered sun—had official sanction from the time of the Emperor Aurelian on, and was followed by Constantine himself before his Christian conversion. (8) Thus the transition to what Constantine may have regarded as

one more such salvation religion would not require any tremendous adjustment of values; and in this sense, I believe that one can say that Constantine was converted from the time of his vision onward (assuming, of course, that the vision as reported by Christian apologists such as Eusebius is a true event). (9) Constantine's confusion about theological values and his use of heretical advisors at the time of the Council of Nicea support this conclusion, because it reveals the relatively unintellectual quality of Constantine's religion, and also shows that his assumed headship of the Church is very similar in kind to the association between the emperor and the cult which was characteristic of earlier imperial religion. (10) As for the deathbed baptism, this was also common in the early Christian period. (11) In this sense, I will regard Constantine's conversion in 312 as genuine, and I cannot accept the critical views of either Jones, who regards the incident of the vision as mere superstition, or of Burckhardt, who sees Constantine merely as a shrewd power politician converting cynically.

(12) Similarly, the impact of the conversion upon the organization of Roman society is a problem of definition. (13) The central and authoritarian position which Constantine assumed as a result of his triumph in the name of Christ is certainly nothing new. (14) Again one may say that the institution of Christianity as a state religion demanding the loyalty of all is no different from the earlier imperial cults or cult of the unconquered sun: most of the persecutions of Christians stemmed from the refusal of the Christians to give homage to a state cult. (15) Thus the issue of transition or change rests on two points; first, is there a significant change resulting from the official recognition of Christianity itself as a religion different from any preceding religion, and second, is there a change in the nature of Christianity itself, transforming early or primitive Christianity into a new, medieval type? (16) Each of these points must be discussed in turn.

(17) Despite Cochrane's brilliant attempt to recognize a difference between the "classical mind" and the Christian self-consciousness, I do not feel that there is really a great difference between the worldly ambitions of the emperors before and after the introduction of official Christianity. (18) The emperors have a world view altogether different from St. Augustine's emphasis on the "City of God" as the real goal of Christian living. (19) To the emperors, Christianity was a source of power for the state; their

rule was *justified* by their support of Christianity, but the aims of that rule remained unchanged: universal dominion, absolute authority for their office, and the ultimate need for all the world to be subject to the Roman law. (20) Worship of the true God and support of his Church merely assured that they were in accord with proper order in the universe, and their aims are clearly worldly in direction. (21) This pattern can certainly be seen not only in Constantine himself, but in his successors right on to the world-conquering schemes and recodification of the law under Justinian. (22) Thus the particular values of Christianity do not create any significant change in the political, social, or legal goals and structure of the Empire.

(23) In contrast, the other question, whether there is a change in the nature of Christianity itself, is I think provocative and suggests a clue to the emergence of what might be called a medieval conception of society and world organization. (24) With Constantine's efforts, especially with the Council of Nicea, one can say that for the first time, the Church had a recognizable, defined institutional structure, and in the future the Church would exist not only as a salvation doctrine, a community of believers, but also as a political entity, an institution, would need rules, laws, a government, a tangible authority structure. (25) From this time on, one begins to look for the rise of governmental and institutional thinking within the Church, as suggested by Ullmann's study of the rise of papal government, and even doctrinal theology starts to take on a new, formalized tone—as in the treatises of Augustine—and doctrinal issues are settled by Councils, conferences, and papal pronouncements, all of them institutional or governmental procedures. (26) This new spirit, which one might argue is the fundamental characteristic of the medieval Church, would thus suggest that with the official position of Christianity, which stems from the conversion of Constantine, one can identify a transition from an early, "late antique" phase in Christianity to the later central and institutional position of Christianity in the medieval world.

(27) In sum, then, I must conclude that while the events and details of political, social, and religious life created by the conversion of Constantine do not reveal any important changes or new features which would suggest a change from the late Roman world to the medieval world, the new spirit which the official position of

Christianity creates does become a basis for later, medieval developments; the transition created by the conversion of Constantine is not external, but internal, and is only made manifest by the slow unfolding of centuries.

Despite the fact that the student left several aspects of the problem unanswered or even unmentioned, and despite the frequent lack of detail, we think that all teachers would agree that this is a truly first-rate answer for an essay examination. First, although the student is never pedantic or detailed merely for the sake of including information, it is clear that he is extremely well-informed and has mastered his reading well enough to relate it to the problems about which he thinks (see sentences 2, 6-7, 11, 17, 25); this information is never irrelevant, but always appears as part of, and in reference to, the point the student is discussing. That there is a problem to be examined is constantly emphasized (sentences 1, 4, 8, 11-12, 17, 23, 27). Moreover, the whole essay is dominated by one overriding theme, which is examined step by step; but each step is always related back to the final conclusion required, which at the end is related in summary form. Each problem is discussed in terms of precise issues and examples that make clear not only the student's grasp of the particular problem, but also his general ability to reason and argue historically (sentences 5-10, 13, 14-15, 17-22, 23-26). The student's excellent writing style helps to preserve the thread of continuity between these various particular discussions and adds greatly to the pleasure of reading his essay; one should particularly note his use of long, graceful sentences, his ease of expressing himself, and his very good emphasis on the transition from one discussion to the next (sentences 4, 5, 11-12, 16-17, 23, 27). As for the failure to be very detailed or to discuss many side issues and questions that in another context would certainly come up, one should remember that this is an essay test, under restrictions of time; and the student's problem is not to settle all issues of the question but to show his mastery of a particular subject, the extent of his in-

formation and grasp of his reading, and his general ability to think and discuss in historical terms. All of these ends the student brilliantly accomplished in his essay; indeed, his success was *enhanced* by his carefulness not to become sidetracked or to wander, and by his clear emphasis on a central idea of his own, which he discussed fully.

The clearest demonstration of the worthiness of the preceding essay can be found by comparing it to the following answer to the same question. We would like to say that this is an example of an exceptionally bad essay, but unfortunately from what we have seen in our experience, it is representative of a larger percentage of exam papers than the earlier sample. To spare the reader, we have abbreviated the example, which ran on for three full exam blue-books, all of them similar in nature:

(1) Constantine was a very great ruler. (2) He was converted in 312 when, before he was going to fight a battle with Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, which is just outside Rome, he saw a vision of a flaming cross in the sky. (3) Not everyone agrees on what Constantine really saw. (4) Some think he was just superstitious and when he saw a weather phenomenon he thought it was a cross. (5) Anyway he put Christian symbols on his standards and made his men pray to Christ; and when he won the battle, he began to make the worship of Christianity required all over the Empire. (6) Pretty soon Constantine was the sole ruler of the Roman Empire, and then he comes out into the open and really established the Church everywhere. (7) This was shown by the Council of Nicea (320) in which, after all was said and done, Constantine was the head and made all the important decisions. (8) This shows that Burckhardt was right in calling Constantine just another oriental despot. (9) In 337 he dies and is baptized by Eusebius.

(10) When did the Roman Empire end? . . .

When, indeed? It is clear that no meaningful answer to the question will emerge from this essay, despite another twenty-five pages of the same kind of stuff. The real tragedy of this example is that

it is obvious that the student did study and prepare. He has some information (sentences 2, 4, 9) and has done some secondary reading (sentences 3-4, 8), although he is not explicit about what he has read. The essay fails at the level of thought, organization, and communication. There is no sense or central point at all in the essay, which is merely a random collection of scraps of knowledge expressed in rather hearsay fashion. The first sentence is meaningless and vague, and reveals that the student has made no effort at all to get to the point, to analyze the issue implied in the question. True there are details and facts, but no order, no idea is imposed on them; and there is no sense of selectivity—does it really matter in terms of the original question whether Constantine's vision was meteorological or not (sentences 3-4)? How does such a detail relate to a main point, if at all? This student is simply trying to put down everything he knows, with a vague generalization at the beginning to suggest a semblance of main point. Even the factual information is imprecise (sentence 7); the student's understanding of what he has read is imprecise and inaccurate (sentence 8); and those original conclusions the student presents are expressed in vague terms that make the conclusions meaningless *non sequiturs* (sentences 4, 7). The essay is terribly difficult to read; not only is the style loose and the usage too general and nonspecific (sentences 5-7), but at best the sentences have an ugly, awkward structure or else are short, choppy, and immature (sentences 1, 2, 4, etc.). At worst, the student is ungrammatical (sentence 6, shift of tense; sentence 9, shift of tense from sentence 6, the last one dealing with Constantine). As for overall organization, summary, or transition, this essay is utterly devoid of any sense of form (sentences 9-10). The mark of a unified, coherent essay is absent here because the student never defined his problem precisely. And thus the student's whole preparation appears meaningless and unthoughtful because of his failure to communicate his study in the form of creative historical writing.