

Christianity was imposed in its beginnings: baptism or execution

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Interview by La Vanguardia to

Catherine Nixey

Historian of early Christianity; author of 'The Age of Gloom'



“Do you think Christianity made any progress compared to Hellenic or Roman polytheism?”

I am 42 years old and I am surprised to feel today with the same intensity the emotions I felt as a child. I was born in Newport, Wales, as green as green Spain. I graduated from Cambridge and I am married to a journalist of 'The Times', where I collaborate. I am human, so I am not an island. I am speaking at the Social Observatory of La Caixa. (Photo: Martí Gelabert)

LLUÍS AMIGET

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— The 'backwardness' of being Christians

“Archimedes,” says Nixey, “discovered Newtonian calculus 2,000 years before Newton.... But a Christian monk in the Egyptian desert destroyed his treatise to write on it an incantation against demons: do you think Christianity made any progress compared to Hellenic or Roman polytheism?”. After also denying that Christianity anticipated the cause of human rights (“it prolonged slavery and was imposed under penalty of death”), he has an explanation for its success as the religion of the West: “Europe was ahead of the world with the industrial revolution and was monotheistic, but before that it had already discovered mathematics, democracy, astronomy, philosophy or theater: who was more progressive, Saint Augustine calling to destroy temples or Plutarch speaking of the intelligence of animals?”

Were Christians martyred by pagan intolerance?

On the contrary: it was the first Christians who began to divide citizens into *Christians and pagans*. Until the adoption of Christianity as the only official religion, no one identified others by their religion...

Today religion is ceasing to define us in Occident.

It has been a long road back to pagan tolerance since the first Christian rulers passed laws condemning to death anyone who was not. Christianity was imposed in its beginnings: baptism or execution. That would explain its rapid spread...

Wasn't Christianity closer to what human rights are today?

This is what Edward Gibbon tells us when he states that Christianity prevailed because it was much more progressive and anticipated human rights.

St. Paul overcame Jewish nativism: anyone could become a Christian.

That is another self-serving reading of the Christian ideologues and historians themselves, but if you read the few texts that survived, such as those of Porphyry or Celsus, to the burning ordered by the Christians, as some of Julian, the emperor nicknamed by them "apostate"...

Weren't most early Christians slaves redeemed by their faith?

...Julian already pointed out that the ten commandments (thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, honor thy parents...) were all already incorporated into most pre-Christian laws.

Was slavery not the norm before Christianity?

There is no historical evidence that Christianity or Christian rulers prohibited slavery...

That's not what we were taught.

What they did forbid the slaves was to be anything other than Christian and forced them to worship only one God: the Christian. Julian already pointed out that this imposition was regressive. St. Paul affirms that "if you are a slave, you must remain a slave".

Does that quote alone prove that Christianity was slaveholding?

There is no historical evidence that Christian rulers ended slavery; on the contrary, those who escaped from it were punished more.

Do you also deny that Christians were martyred in circuses?

Some were and, indeed, this is true: Christian rulers banned gladiator fights...

Well, at last you admit something...

...But only because they were too expensive. But there are also Christian sources, true, that claim they were cruel.

Why are we Christians, then, only because of the fear of our ancestors?

History does not always impose itself by reason, but also by chance. And Constantine, who imposed Christianity, had the enormous merit or luck or both to survive 30 years in a profession, that of emperor, as risky as that of gladiator, while Julian barely lasted two. And 30 years are already enough to establish a lasting cult...

...Bimillenary: won't it have some virtue?

It was for Constantine to unite an empire, a God, an emperor...

The European Union is still a resurgent echo of that empire: it didn't do too badly.

Constantine is also interesting: he had supernatural visions—something natural then—and the sun stopped for him, nothing new under the Roman sun either, as it already stopped for Augustus or Aurelius, who see gods, also those of the enemy, just when it is in their interest to make a pact.

Why make a pact with the God of the poor Jews, then already defeated and dispersed?

For politics, and that is why we find today coins of his empire in which he is seen next to Christ on the cross and, next to both, the God Apollo and the three on Olympus... when he agreed to a truce.

How many centuries did it take to eradicate paganism from the empire to its borders?

Centuries, indeed. Think that in 420 an imperial edict is promulgated in which the pagans are condemned to be “struck down by the avenging sword”....

Why is Julian the Apostate so popular and researched by historians today?

Because it embodies the perfect counterfactual history with fascinating questions: what would have happened if Julian had lived as long as Constantine, what would Europe be like today if it had not been Christian for 2,000 years?

Just because of what could have been and wasn't?

These questions also explain what it was in the end. And the emperor Julian was educated in Christianity and rejected it to return to Hellenic cults: he was an imperial Christian pagan. Too bad that almost all his writings were destroyed and we hardly know about him and his thought because of what Christians wrote against him.