EDITOR'S NOTE

This edition of the Ghana Bulletin of Theology contains what we refer to as, "The Basel Lecture Series" – lectures delivered by professors from the Faculty of Theology, University of Basel, during their collaborative and study visit to our Department from 26th -30th January, 2016.

Knowledge of the history of religions yields a deeper and richer understanding of the origins of diverse religious beliefs. Subsequently, acquisition of such knowledge leads to respecting and tolerating other faiths without losing one's own. Religious views of people had played and still play a major part in their lives as the following contributions show.

The first article analyses the discourse on primitive religion within European scholarship and shows how writing about religion in Africa reveals Europe's self-representation and the late 19th century study of religion.

In the second article, the author examined the use of symbols such as the sun, light and the cross during Constantine's reign. He is able to prove that Emperor Constantine's religious policy made deliberate use of the pre-existing traditions and integrated them to diverse world beliefs.

The multiple approaches in undertaking theology during the medieval ages are also highlighted and linked to the adoption of a pluralistic approach of a modern cross cultural theological exchange.

Prof. Bernhardt reiterates the fact that inter-religious dialogue is possible. However, there is the need to theologize in a way that is impactful for people of all religions.

The Basel Mission has a beautiful history which is interwoven with the history of Ghana. On the occasion of the Mission's two hundredth anniversary in the country, Andreas Heuser presents

this history in a refreshing manner and reminds Christians of their duty to equally work for the social, economic and cultural development of the nation and not only strive for their spiritual transformation.

In the final article, the historical origin of how the Ga- Adangmes of Ghana could be of Jewish descent is traced. Judging from this presentation and its authenticity, it might not be a myth after all.

The papers in this volume promise a good read and it is my hope that our efforts as academics contribute to the relevance of religion in shaping society.

George Ossom-Batsa

CONSTANTINE, CHRIST AND THE SUN
CONSIDERATIONS ON THE EMPEROR'S "INCLUSIVE" RELIGIOUS POLICY

Prof. Martin Wallraff

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the use of religious symbols by the emperor Constantine (early 4th cent. AD). While imperial references to Christ are attested early on, the Sun god remains the more prominent image throughout the whole of Constantine's reign and till his death in 337. This holds true for contemporary interpretations of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312), as well as for the planning and founding of the new capital on the Bosphorus and for the choreography of the emperor's burial. But this should not be seen as an alternative to Constantine's interest in the Christian faith. Despite the sun's not having played an important role as messianic metaphor in the Bible, Christianity long before Constantine developed an interest in Jesus as the "sun of righteousness" or "true sun," as attested in writers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen (3rd cent.). It was therefore in a positive light that Christians could see the sanctioning of the "Sun-Day" as a day of rest. A similar case may be the introduction of a feast at the winter solstice (the 25th of December), which was the birth of both the "new sun" and the Son of God. Constantine's religious policy made deliberate use of polysemous and inclusive religious symbols; the ideal was not "conversion" from one belief to another but the integration of a diverse world of beliefs.*

On the 28th of October 312 AD, after a long and dramatic battle, Constantine defeated his rival Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in front of the gates of Rome. Subsequent authors viewed this battle and victory as a sort of final struggle between paganism and Christianity – and as a symbol of the latter's unconditional triumph. There is no mention of this in contemporary sources. Though religious interpretations were in circulation, but the victory was nowhere attributed to Christ but rather to a "deity", in a very general and diffuse sense of the word. An official eulogist spoke of a "divine spirit" with which the emperor was apparently in alliance[26],

[26] *Mens divina*, Pan.lat. 12[9], 2,5.

but he elaborates no further and offers no name for the "spirit". Similarly, vague is the inscription on the official monument that was erected after the victory. On the Arch of Constantine that stands in the centre of Rome and which must, as it still does today, have drawn the attention of every visitor, the emperor is said to have achieved his victory "through a divinity's inspiration"[27].

Which divinity is meant here? The text does not say, but the monument's reliefs give a clear answer. Here, Christianity and Christ do not feature; very apparent, on the other hand, are the repeated references to the sun, most obviously on the arch's eastern narrow side (Fig. 1). Here, inside a large medallion, the Sun God Sol/Helios rises on his chariot from the sea and travels toward the sky. Directly under this we find a depiction of the *adventus*, Constantine's arrival in the city of Rome. The monument's message is that the new ruler owed his victory to this god. Constantine and the Sun God also appear as a pair on numerous coins (*sol-comes-coins,* Fig. 2). Christian motifs, on the other hand, make their first appearance much later in the official imperial iconography and are only clearly visible after 324, the year in which Constantine defeated Licinius and thus became ruler of the entire empire. Indeed, Christianity was stronger in the newly conquered East and thus, it was a political factor that could not be neglected.

I. Constantine and the Sun

This observation has sometimes been understood to show that in 324, Constantine turned away from the religion of the sun and toward that of Christianity, particularly because at this time the number of sol images on coins began to decrease, eventually stopping all together. This is supposed to represent a kind of conversion of the sort "Christ *instead of* Sol". However, there is evidence to suggest that the situation was not so simple and that for Constantine, it was not a matter of one replacing the other, but rather of one complementing the other, hence "Christ *and* Sol". This could be in an idiosyncratic way. It is at any rate striking that

[27] *Instinctu divinitatis,* CIL 6,1139 = ILS 694.

the emperor by no means used the founding of a new capital on the Bosphorus to plan and create a Christian model city. There was admittedly a church (carrying the programmatic name "Eirene", that is to say "Peace", to remind us of the end of the persecution and the guarantee of religious peace), but the urbanistically prominent places in the city were occupied differently. In particular, Constantine had a tall column erected in a conspicuous position in the forum, which one could see from far over the sea. On top was a statue of himself, the emperor styled as the sun god Helios. The inscription read "For Constantine, who shines like the sun". The statue was also religiously venerated. A century later, a church author complained in his writing that even "the Christians try to win the favour of Constantine's image atop the porphyry column by making sacrifices, they honour it with incense and lights, offer him prayers like a god and carry out protective rites to ward off harm"[28]. The imperial cult, against which the Christians had once protested so vehemently and because of which many had lost their lives, continued unabated in what was now a Christian society. It could not be killed off; in the circumstances one could only try to ascribe a Christian meaning to this so pagan-like *roisoleil*. That is why relics from Christ's cross were housed there[29].Today, the statue no longer exists (already in the Middle Ages it was toppled during a stormy night), but a decent part of the column still stands and recalls Constantine's sun-monument, a monument which was by no means easy to reconcile with Christianity.

Christ *and* the sun – this religious duality, confusing both for contemporaries and those born later, permeates Constantine's life right up to his passing. Shortly before his death he had himself baptized by the "court bishop" Eusebius of Nicomedia, as he lay on his deathbed. Yet at the same time as this last, big prove of commitment to Christianity, the minting of an official

[28] *Philostorgius, h.e. 2,17.*
[29] *Socrates, h.e. 1,17,8f.*

consecration coin was underway, upon which nothing Christian was to be found. Constantine appears on the coin, riding in a *quadriga* up to the sky where he is being welcomed by God's outstretched hand (Fig. 3). The representation lies fully within the tradition of Helios iconography. Even the Christian commentator Eusebius of Caesarea was unable to come up with a theologically acceptable meaning forth depiction[30]. It is likely that the coexistence of references to Christ and references to the Sun was also apparent in Constantine's funeral and burial place. The mausoleum, conventionally called the "Church of the Holy Apostles", was interpreted by Eusebius in such a way that Constantine gave his own burial a Christian framework, seeing as the emperor's sarcophagus was surrounded by twelve slabs (*stēlai*) representing the twelve apostles[31]. Clearly Eusebius deliberately refrained from drawing the conclusion that, from a Christian point of view, was really the only possible one, namely that the one in the centre of the Apostles was Christ. In other words: Constantine was portraying himself as a new Christ, however original and problematic this may be from a theological perspective! Unfortunately, nothing remains of the monument (today it lies under the Sultan Mehmet Fâtih Camii and excavations under the mosque are not possible). The construction probably stood in the tradition of late antiquity imperial mausoleums, for which a very prominent example is preserved in Thessaloniki in the Rotunda of Galerius. Several aspects suggest, however, that this Christian interpretation was not the only possible one. Whoever saw the twelve slabs (*stēlai*) and the emperor's monument could readily have thought of the sun and the twelve zodiacs; this is also a very common iconography. Constantine as "sun" *and* as "Christ": that is the dead ruler's religious-political legacy.

Later generations did not know what to make of this legacy, and so it is no wonder that the arrangement I have just described was

[30] *Eusebius, v.C. 4,73.*
[31] *Eusebius, v.C. 4,60,3.*

soon felt to be objectionable and was removed. Constantine's sarcophagus was transferred to the vestibule of the now clearly Christian "Church of Apostles". In this respect, Constantine's religious policy can be said to have failed. His attempt to broaden and redefine Christianity, so that it would become "compatible" with a diffuse and abstract *sun-cultas* the new imperial religion, was not even accepted by Eusebius, even though that theologian and Bishop made a considerable effort to explain Constantine's religious innovations and to make them palatable to a Christian audience.

II. Christ and Sun

We should not, however, dismiss the program of "Christ *and* the sun" as naïve and unrealistic simply because in its intended form it failed to convince the ensuing ages. It goes without saying that the effects of Constantine's religious policy were considerable in general. The special aspect of sun worship was not just due to an imperial caprice of that moment. Rather, it drew upon important aspects of contemporary religious culture and had wide-reaching consequences of its own. We should, first and foremost, keep in mind that the veneration of the sun was in no way a simple "pagan cult" among many others (where the term "pagan" is somewhat inappropriate and problematic anyway). Rather, the Sun God had risen to become a leading and popular divinity over the course of the empire. So much so that it became expression of a new, deeper and "more spiritual" form of religiousness. It did not exclude traditional religions, rather included them. In this way it could embody and express their "spiritual", "luminescent" and "abstract" components. Solar traits are found in the Persian Mithras as well as in the Greek Apollo, in the Syrian Elagabal just as in the Palestinian Christ. The sun as an overarching divinity is more a bundle of motifs and ideas than a particular and clearly defined religion in the traditional sense of the word. The sun as "unconquered" (*sol invictus*) also fits well into Roman military culture.

Christians had been taking part in this religious trend already long before Constantine. It should be made clear in this context, that

the Bible itself does not offer all that many points of contact. Although Christ is described with a long series of honorary titles and metaphors in the New Testament, the sun does not appear in this context. Nor do the texts of the Old Testament lend themselves to such references. To a certain extent, the authors of the Hebrew Bible were still embroiled in a struggle with old Oriental star cults. Polemic rejection therefore predominated: "When you raise your eyes toward the sky and see all the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon, and the stars, then do not let yourself be led astray! You should not prostrate yourself before them nor serve them. The Lord, your God, has allocated them to all the other peoples under the sky" (Deut 4:19). Israel should serve Yahweh alone, no other gods. That the sun is created surprisingly late in the account of creation in the Priestly Source, namely on the fourth day (Gen 1:16), can be seen as a reflection of this criticism and distancing. The depreciatory designation of the sun as a lamp is a further example of this. Nor should we place too much value on the beautiful passage, which has had such an important career in later interpretations, in which we hear of the "Sun of righteousness" (Mal 3:20): there are no messianic references there and a reference to Christ is not at all plausible.

Nevertheless, it did not take long for such interpretations to gain currency. Already around 200, the Alexandrian philosopher and theologian Clement could describe Christ as "all spirit, all light from the father, all eye; he sees everything, hears everything, knows everything, studies the forces with force"[32]. These are just the type of statements that were made about the sun in antiquity. And indeed, elsewhere Clement can speak of the "sun of righteousness" as part of the new creation, and this sun is none other than Christ himself[33]. The result for Clement is a veritable "religion of light". Christ, the word of God, the *logos* (as the theologians said) is the "sun of the soul; thanks alone to this sun, when

[32] *Clement, str. 7,2,5,5.*
[33] *Clement, prot. 11,114,1-4.*

it has risen in the depths of the soul, is the eye of the soul illuminated"[34]. This idea did not take on such philosophical or platonic traits among all Christian thinkers. But the basic concept, according to which Christ is the "true sun", was nonetheless widespread. This also makes sense because a whole series of parallels with Christian piety and religious practice was apparent. For instance, there was the old tradition according to which Christians performed their prayers facing the east, facing the *oriens*, toward the rising sun. Origen prompted the believers to "always look to the east, where the sun of righteousness rises, where light originates for you"[35].

A further element, which had a particular influence on Christian religious life, was the observation of the Jewish seven-day week, in particular the sanctification of the seventh day (Saturday) as well as the celebration of the resurrection on the first (= eighth) day of the week. This seven-day rhythm also established itself in the general culture of the Roman Imperial Age; in such a way so as to connect the seven days with the seven planets. Thus it was not thanks to any extensive planning, but rather by accident that the day of Saturn (Saturday) fell upon the Sabbath and that the day of the sun (Sunday) fell upon the old Christian day of the Lord (*kyriakē*). This arrangement naturally gave renewed impetus to the sun-Christ connection. It was now possible to celebrate the resurrection of Christ as the rising of the true sun. For these reasons it was clever of Constantine, when in the year 321 he issued a decree, to ordain that "all judges, the population of the city and craftsmen of all sort shall be at rest on the venerable day of the

[34] *Clement, prot. 6,68,4.*
[35] *Origen, hom. in Lev. 9,10.*

sun"[36]. This decree has often been interpreted to show that Constantine was appealing especially to Christians here. But the text gives us no reason to think this, indeed nor does the act itself: in particular, the part about Sunday being a day of rest was previously *not* part of the Christian tradition (only worship on Sundays had been). Just like in Judaism, generally the seventh day (Saturday) had been the one of rest, insofar as rest was possible.

On the other hand, many different people in the empire could doubtless have related positively to this provision. We can suppose that in this way it had an integrative effect – and that it was arguably also intended to do so. The "venerable day of the sun" did not only mean something to the Christians. Furthermore, one did not need to be particularly religious to appreciate the value of a regular day of rest. The Sunday-edict is thus a good example of Constantine's intelligent religious policy, in that it took up pre-existing traditions, expanded them and integrated them into a larger whole.

The introduction of the Christmas celebration on the 25th of December may represent a comparable case. The date is clearly not biblical, nor is it predetermined by internal Christian traditions, but rather by the winter solstice. The church fathers' considerable polemic concerning the pagan "birth of the sun" offers ample evidence to show that the celebration was unimportant for Christians. Yet although various clues point to the origin of this celebration having taking place during Constantine's reign, there is no clear evidence showing that the emperor was personally involved.

[36] *Cod. Iust. 3,12,2.*

In Christianity there had already been occasional attempts to express the crossover between Christ and Sol in art. In a small mausoleum on the outskirts of Rome (nowadays underneath St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican) there is a roof mosaic that could be considered to be a standard representation of Sol (fig. 4). Indeed, there are no Christian motifs in the mosaic itself, but the context of the image and in particular, the mosaics on the sidewalls suggest an overall Christian interpretation. Can we therefore identify Sol represented on the roof with Christ? We cannot be sure, but it is probable, especially seeing as there is a close parallel in a Christian catacomb.

Prior to Constantine's reign we do not find any clearly intentional and theologically thought-out representations of Christ with solar aspects. Hence, we can assume that it was the emperor's religious policy that promoted such connections, perhaps even made them possible. On the triumphal arch of the church S. Paolo fuori le mura on the Via Ostiensis in front of the gates of Rome there is a Christ shown with a nimbus and a corona as the "true sun" (fig. 5). In order to properly understand the image, I should make clear that this church, which dates to the end of the fourth century, has its apse facing east. This was unusual for Rome at the time since the older churches were oriented the other way around. For topographical reasons, a different orientation would not actually have been possible in this location, but we can also interpret the orientation as an auspicious one. The Christians' prayer no longer went in the direction of the rising sun, but toward Christ, "the spiritual sun", on the triumphal arch.

The same idea has been materialized, albeit in a more complex and multi-layered way, in the mosaic in the apse of the Justinian Basilica of S. Apollinare in Classe, near Ravenna (fig. 6). Also, there we find the image in the eastern part of the building. And

also there we find Christ dominating the middle of the scene, presented symbolically in a golden cross. The cross itself is contained within a large crown that is rising over the horizon of a paradisiacal landscape. The transfiguration of Christ thus becomes the rising sun of the new creation. Although other levels of meaning are apparent in this mosaic, the central elements of the cross and crown as victory symbols presuppose the representations of Constantine's rule.

Constantine's amalgam of emperor, Christ and the sun was, in the long run, unconvincing as ought to have been in its intended form. It arguably could not, because it was too individually linked to this one emperor. It also stands in opposition to certain basic theological beliefs that were not as easy to broaden as Constantine had hoped. However, the consequences of his attempt are manifold and sometimes surprising. For instance, the christogram (that is to say the superimposed letters *chi* and *rho* standing for Christ), which was an important Constantinian victory symbol, could be used as a symbol of light in connection with baptism a century after the emperor's reign. It is festively depicted in the roof mosaic from the baptistery in Albenga in northern Italy (fig. 7). Here we find both Christ (represented by the christogram) and the sun portrayed together against a starry-sky background and depicted inside several rings of light that diminish in luminosity the further we get from the centre.

Ultimately, it is the idea of light that connects Christ with the sun. This sounds simple, but it is as an important motif in Late Antiquity, both in religion and in art. It not only expresses itself in the light as it is *portrayed* in the mosaics, but also in the real light that is used as a design element in architecture. The large Christian basilicas, such as they are found all over the Mediterranean since Constantine's time, are bright, festive gathering places flooded

with light (totally unlike the classical temples with their dark inner chambers housing the god). There are splendid examples in places like Rome or Thessaloniki (S. Sabina and the Acheiropoietos Church respectively). But we should not think that this is a Christian invention. Already the first monumental construction that goes back to Constantine speaks an architectural language that was new and unusual for ancient eyes. Even though the (perfectly preserved) "basilica" in Trier (fig. 8) appears to us to be a church and indeed is used as one today, it was originally a classic palace aula without any religious function. The diaphanous and thus bodiless walls transform this secular building into a true temple of light.

The abstract motif of "light" makes it particularly clear that Constantine's religious policy was not at all aimed at exclusion, rather entirely at inclusion and integration. Later generations (up to today) have mostly misunderstood him by assuming a one-dimensional journey from paganism to Christianity and by reducing his role to one who simply made a transition from A to B, from paganism to Christianity. This may well be the *de facto* result of his religious policy from a distant point of view of world-history, in retrospect so to speak. But this point of view would not be doing justice to the emperor's own intentions. We should not simply align him with the major paths that led from pagan antiquity to the Christian Middle Ages, but rather he should be taken seriously as a representative of late antique religious culture. Perhaps it is in our own time, the 21st century with its new religious challenges and with a new, polymorphic religious landscape, that we can begin to really appreciate the colourful and wild world of Late Antiquity.



Figure 1: Rome, Triumphal arch for Constantine, East Side (Sun God and, below, *adventus* of the emperor)



Figure 2: Sol comes coin (the Sun and the emperor as companions)



Figure 3: Coin minted in occasion of the death of Constantine (*consecratio*)



Figure 4: Rome, Mosaic on the vault of a small mausoleum (3rd cent.), excavated under the basilica of St. Peter

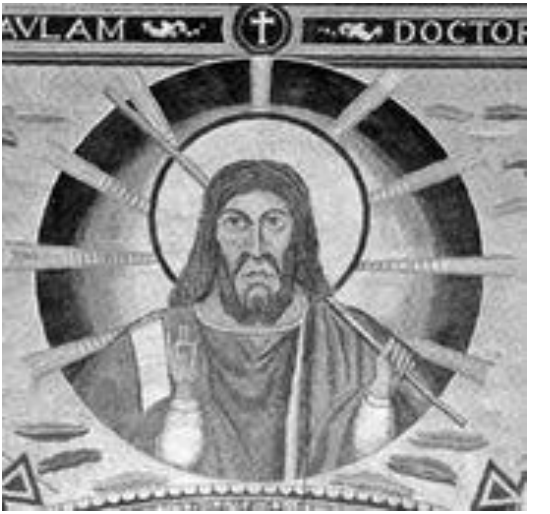


Figure 5: Rome, Mosaic on the triumphal arch of the basilica St. Paul outside the walls (5th cent.)



Figure 6: Ravenna, Mosaic in the apse of S. Apollinare in Classe (6th cent.)



Figure 7: Albenga SOL



Figure 8: Trier

Source of Pictures

1: © M.Wallraff; **2:** J. P. C. Kent e.a., Die römischeMünze, München 1973, Fig. 629; **3:** A. Grabar, Die Kunst des frühenChristentums, München 1967, Fig. 214; **4:** F. Gerke, Spätantike und frühesChristentum, Baden-Baden 1967, 59; **5:** St. Paul vor den Mauern, Bologna 1967, Fig. 10; **6:** © DAI Rome; **7:** B. Brenk (ed.), SpätantikeundfrühesChristentum, Berlin 1977, fig. 20; **8:** K. Ehling/G. Weber (eds.), Konstantin der Grosse, Darmstadt 2011, 52, Fig. 10.