



Religion in history: conflict, conversion and co-existence

Byzantine and late Roman religions

John Wolffe

For my first discussion with a leading scholar I have come to Keble College Oxford to meet the warden, Professor Averil Cameron. Professor Cameron is an expert on religion in the late Roman and Byzantine empires.

Many students will not have studied this period before. When students who are perhaps familiar with later periods, perhaps as late as the 18th, 19th 20th Centuries, come back to studying the era from the 3rd to 7th Centuries, what leaps of understanding and imagination do you think it is important that they begin to start with?

Averil Cameron

I think imagination is a very important word here. The biggest difference is that we simply do not have as much information about these early periods, we do not have diaries, we do not have many letters or if we do they are very formal letters, official letters. We just do not have the kind of material that you would have certainly for the 19th Century and of course modern history. So that means we have to use our imagination to put things together it also means we have to use visual art and archaeology a great deal.

John Wolffe

And we need to grasp that we are dealing with a very long span of time, which can telescope perhaps for us, but was many human lifetimes.

Averil Cameron

Well it was, and furthermore for some of that long period of time we have less information than for other parts of it. For example, in early Christianity we really don't have very much information about the spread of early Christianity or Christians themselves outside the New Testament for the first two centuries.

John Wolffe

Now focusing in on the period from the 3rd Century – why in a nutshell do you think the Roman authorities persecuted Christians at least intermittently during that period?

Averil Cameron

I think we have changed our views of this period, I think a generation or so ago, scholars were rather sceptical about Pagan religion and did not take it very seriously because it was not Christianity, but now we are much more conscious of religious developments so one can now see the 3rd Century emperors within a rather lively religious context and they were concerned about worship of the gods and they really could not deal with any groups of people like Christians who refused to go along and make the gestures they wanted them to do. I think they were in a dilemma they did not really know what to do.

John Wolffe

So they did have a sense of a positive commitment on a religious level to Paganism, or do you think it was more political?

Averil Cameron

I think they had more of a religious motivation than has been allowed for before and one can certainly see this in the 3rd Century when Diocletian for example is trying to impose Pagan state religion more forcefully than it had been before. In the interests of the future of the

empire, I think they really did believe that unity and religious unity was important for the future of the empire.

John Wolffe

And then we come to Constantine, what do you make of his conversion? It seems to me it was a very different kind of conversion from say the conversion of St Paul on the road to Damascus.

Averil Cameron

It certainly was yes. But there again I would see it in terms of putting Constantine into a background and the context he came from was of a group of similar ambitious dynasts, perhaps we call them, who were all competing for imperial power and several of them were experimenting or were attracted with other kinds of religious practices. Now he was not the only one of his rivals who was interested in Christianity and that is sometimes forgotten. Even Maxentius and Licinius whom he defeated in order to gain supreme power for himself, had been flirting with Christianity. So around Constantine there was quite a lot of knowledge of Christianity. So he did not suddenly make a move out of the blue, he can be explained in that context.

John Wolffe

Do you think it had elements of personal spiritual conviction or experience behind it, or was it primarily political?

Averil Cameron

Well we can't really answer this question in the long run because Constantine does not tell us how he felt inside. However, he does tell us in some of his letters, in some of his pronouncements, in a very interesting speech that he wrote which is still ex-stamped about Christianity. He shows a very high level of commitment to Christianity right from the moment when he won the famous battle of the Melvan Bridge in 312 AD. So while I can't say what went on in the heart of Constantine, I do personally believe that he was very committed to Christianity from that moment on and he never deviated from it. He also says and I do not say why we should not believe him, that he had a duty laid upon him by God and that duty was to bring about the right religion in the empire, and he thought that the empire would suffer if he did not do it and he says that in a letter which he wrote in the couple of months after his victory in 312 and to me that is very striking.

John Wolffe

But what do you make of the way that he delayed baptism until right at the end of his life?

Averil Cameron

Well I think too much is made of that in most of the books, it was very common at this stage for Christians to be baptised only after a very long preparation, a long and arduous preparation. Infant baptism was not yet established as the norm, Constantine took his baptism extremely seriously and it is clear that once he had been baptised we are told, that he put off imperial clothes, only wore white and the object of delaying it as long as possible was to make sure that when you died and went to heaven you would be as pure and sinless as you could be. So I think that this was understandable given the practice of the time, and it fits in with what we know about the seriousness and the elaboration of baptismal rights in the early church.

John Wolffe

And how rapidly do you think that Constantine's conversion and commitment to Christianity was reflected at the grass roots in the empire, and what variations of reception of Christianity do you think we encounter?

Averil Cameron

Every emperor after Constantine except one was Christian, which is quite remarkable in itself. The church under Constantine had a very good organisation of bishops, so what we see in the next generation or so is a very rapid development of structure in the church. It is more difficult to see how far down as it were in the population that reached, especially in rural

areas, and there is quite a lot of evidence that Paganism and other beliefs continued for several Centuries, but that does not surprise me because we are talking about a very long process. So mostly we do not know directly about the rural lower classes or even the urban lower classes, but what we can say, gradually the structure of the church, the power of Bishops, the effectiveness of their teaching, grew very rapidly after Constantine.

John Wolffe

I am struck looking at the anti-Pagan legislation from this period that on the one hand one can see a determination to try and impose Christianity, on the other hand the fact that this legislation is needed is very much evidence that Paganism is still very much alive, even in quite influential circles.

Averil Cameron

What you had to remember of course is that Constantine never attempted to wipe out Paganism, after all Christians could not possibly have been more than some people would say 10%, I would say a much lower proportion of the entire population and so emperors after Constantine proceeded more by encouraging Christianity and giving imperial support to bishops and churches and so on than they did by attacking Pagans. By the end of the 4th Century, they feel on slightly stronger ground and they are able and we have a more fanatical emperor in Theodosius I, who is prepared to bring in legislation against Pagans and also against heretics amongst Christians, but I do not believe it worked just like that. I think it took a long time to take effect and there again you have to ask, how was it enforced?

John Wolffe

What do you make of the one exception, Julian the one Roman Emperor who was not a Christian?

Averil Cameron

Julian is a very fascinating figure, he was of course brought up a Christian, he was from the family of Constantine, although his father had suffered in the purges that had happened after Constantine died. Julian was left with his brother in a very isolated way and I think it was natural that he looked for something different and he was allowed, rather strangely, to go to Athens for his education where of course he met with teachers who were Pagan, Neo-Platonist philosophers, and not surprisingly given the isolation of his upbringing, he fell for it. And so he tried to reverse the situation in a rather curious way, but as we know he did not have very long, and who knows what would have happened if he had had a longer reign?

John Wolffe

And this is a rather different kind of more philosophical Paganism from the popular cults which we presume would have been very persistent at a local level.

Averil Cameron

Julian was an intellectual, Julian became extremely enthusiastic about all kinds of obscure kinds of Paganism and he revived some, for example bathing in the blood of an ox, which certainly did not happen very often, and I think he was regarded by many people as really quite eccentric, and he even managed to alienate the upper class population of Antioch among whom there were many educated Pagans, so if he could not get them on his side he was not going to succeed more widely.

John Wolffe

So where do the Jews fit into this picture of religious diversity?

Averil Cameron

If we are talking about say, the 3rd, 4th, 5th Century, research has really moved on in relation to the position of Jews in the Roman Empire. I think now we are far, far more aware that Jews were very much integrated, they were spread all over the empire especially in cities perhaps, but they were very much integrated into the city structures and they lived side by side with other people and I think the general picture that scholars have about this now is that there was a lot of interaction between Jews and Christians, and of course Pagans. Jews were not

separated out it would seem in perhaps quite the way that Christians separated themselves out.

One of the key things that comes out of this is that Christians were commonly exhorted by their Bishops not to associate with Jews, which tells me that they were doing it, that many Christians were still following Jewish practices and the Bishops like John Christenson at the end of the 4th Century were very strongly telling them that they must not go to synagogues, they must not associate with Jews and so that clearly indicates that there was a lot of assimilation in practice.

John Wolffe

How did the Roman authorities regard the Jews?

Averil Cameron

The Roman authorities always treated the Jews as a special kind of religious group and so in a funny kind of way they were protected, whereas Christians were treated very differently. So Jews were never persecuted in the way that Christians were, and they were allowed to have their own laws, they were recognised as a separate group, and this went on for quite a long time, it was really the Byzantine Emperors who began to be rather more hostile to Jews and tried to bring in legislation saying that all Jews must convert to Christianity, which of course did not work because it was unenforceable.

John Wolffe

Why do you think that change of attitude took place?

Averil Cameron

This came about when the Byzantine Empire was under threat, it came about at the time of the Arab invasions and during the Iconoclast controversy in the 8th Century, I think it was a kind of side effect of the tensions, the religious tensions and political tensions that were very difficult during that period.

John Wolffe

But if we move further forward into the 5th and 6th Centuries, how much do you think Paganism persisted into that period?

Averil Cameron

I would say that Paganism did persist, but certainly in minorities. There are still philosophical Pagans in Athens until the 6th Century. However, emperors are becoming more and stronger and stronger in their attempts to impose Christianity, I do not think it was Paganism that occupied their attention at this stage really, it was deviation among Christians. It was Christian doctrinal differences, which emperors struggled and struggled to sort out in the interests of imperial unity and they all found it extremely difficult.

John Wolffe

Yes, and in this period Christianity itself is becoming increasingly diverse isn't it?

Averil Cameron

Well Justinian is a case in point and 6th Century Justinian really tried extremely hard to bring the divergences between the east and the west because we are now seeing this, this going apart of the eastern part of the empire and the western part of the empire. He tried very hard to bring them together, but ultimately that was a failure and so it was during that period that Syriac speaking churches in the east and non-Chalcedonian churches developed and became very strong and some of them survive to this day.

John Wolffe

When we are thinking about this period would you tend to emphasize religious conflict, or would you say that rather there was a good deal of positive peaceful co-existence whether between Christians and Pagans, Christians and Jews or diverse forms of Christians?

Averil Cameron

We need to look at our evidence, very often the evidence comes from a very narrow sphere of the population, and mainly upper class educated people, question bishops. We get an impression from that perhaps that there is a lot of conflict going on and certainly there were major problems to be solved. We know much less about ordinary people. What we do know for example from inscriptions or from sometimes from archaeology, sometimes from visual art, it does indicate that people just got on with it, I think there was much more overlap than most people nowadays suppose.

John Wolffe

And then in the early 7th Century, we come to a crucial religious and political development that surely no one could have anticipated at least not in the form that it took – the rapid rise of Islam. How do you think that affected the post Roman world, particularly in its religious aspects?

Averil Cameron

We are still trying to understand the rise of Islam, what was going on in Syria after the Arab conquest, the sources again are very difficult, the whole subject is still very controversial for all sorts of very good historical reasons. First of all, the impact was one of conquest, what happened – it was not of a new religion, it was that about a third of the territory of the Eastern Empire was lost in a very, very short time and this was a huge trauma. It was only rather slowly, really, that the Romans realised that this was a new religion, so I think the impact of Islam in a religious sense was rather slow, in fact very slow, and many scholars would argue although this is not the classic Muslim interpretation, that Islam developed gradually through the 7th Century and was not 'ready-made' as it were under Mohammed when the Arab armies conquered Syria and the what we now call the Middle East.

John Wolffe

Would you say that the presence of Islam engenders, at least in the somewhat longer term, a sense of sharper religious conflict?

Averil Cameron

That is a very difficult question to answer I am afraid. I think one of the questions we have to ask is what happened in the lands that had been conquered by the Arabs? How many Christians converted? And the answer I think is very large numbers, so that is one side of the question. The other side of the question is what did the Byzantines, we now have to call them, think about Islam or know about it, and I think the answer there is they did not actually know very much about it and they were much more concerned for quite a long time with internal problems and with keeping their rather fractured empire together and expanding into the North, because there were new developments in the North.

So I think there is quite a long period of, in a way, lack of awareness and lack of interest and we simply do not have very much writing about Islam from the Byzantine Empire during this period, very very little. Our main writer from the 8th Century is John of Damascus, John of Damascus did not even live in the Byzantine Empire, he wrote his famous treatises in Palestine in a Monastery quite near to Jerusalem.

John Wolffe

As we come to the end of the period we are discussing, what were the tensions that you think lead to the eventual split between Eastern and Western Christianity?

Averil Cameron

You have to remember that after all the Roman Empire in the West as a political structure had ceased to exist since the end of the 5th Century. Now Justinian in the 6th Century tried to recover the Western provinces with partial, but only small success. So those kingdoms that grew up in the West were able to develop in a Christian way in a very different way from these, so we have already for a long time we have the germ of diverse development between East and West and this is simply what happened, and so I think a lot of the issues that came up, lets say in the 10th Century and the 11th Century when we do have quarrels between Eastern and Western Christians and Latin's and Byzantines and Orthodox, however you like

to call them, had their roots very early in simple divergence of practice for which a theological explanation was produced at a later stage and then argued about. One example is use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist or ordinary bread as used in the Eastern churches.

John Wolffe

Professor Cameron thank you very much.

Averil Cameron

Thank you.