

## **Habilitation thesis summary**

### **Considerations on the Church and Christianity in antiquity**

**Professor Marius Tepelea, PhD**

In the *Preliminaries*, I presented the most important introductory issues related to the study of Christianity in antiquity. Having as a model the Greek and Latin historians, the first Christian historians have tried to present in their own form and from the Christian point of view, their understanding of the events of the Church and the political life of the Roman Empire. A History of the Church can't be treated without seeing the hand of God and His intervention in human history. If we exclude the supernatural character of the Church, the history of Christianity would be a simple string of dates, names and places, empty and identical to the history of any religion. The information reached until our days about spreading the Christian religion are coming obviously from mainly Christian sources, not necessarily objective. Without minimizing the importance of information from Eusebius and other Christian historians, the modern historians have sought to filter this information by objectivity, eliminating the facts considered legendary or being truncated and distorted. Even the best works about the early church were hit by some difficulties and failed to fully express what their authors have proposed, namely a clear, balanced and scientific life of Christian in the first centuries. Methodological and approachable aspects may vary from one author to another. When talking about the early church, it is obvious that most sources are Christian, and some of them should be treated with caution and scientific balance.

Chapter I deals with *Complexity of relations between Christians and pagans in antiquity*, having as subchapters aspects of the importance of Christian missionaries in the early church, exorcism role in the conversion to Christianity, the example of the martyrs to the Christian and pagan world. Eusebius from Caesarea mentions how the followers Apostles understood to spread the good news of the kingdom of heaven. First, those who wanted to become missionaries followed the example of the Apostles, learning to apply the principles of community life, characteristic of the early Church. Disease cures, exorcism, speaking foreign languages and countless miracles drew many pagans to Christianity. The early church was full of charisma and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The most attractive and effective way to convert people to Christianity was the miracle. The pagans were sensitive not only to exorcisms made by harismatics, but were also curious to learn more about the demons which they were told that animate statues of their gods. As early as the second century, Christian writers have claimed that demons are trying to deceive the pagans. It may be that pagans have had a sense of fear of exorcists, who had the power to command evil spirits to get out from the possessed. However, the pagans were convinced that an exorcist is stronger than a pagan wizard. The testimony of the witnesses produced a strong impression on viewers, especially pagans. Sometimes, however, some pagans looked upon as some suicide martyrs, not understanding why they didn't accept to sacrifice themselves to the gods to escape from death. Roman governors not always agreed to condemn Christians to death, knowing that this can create such a vivid impression to viewers. The suffering of the martyrs and the search for truth through reason led to numerous conversions to Christianity, courage and truth ensuring solid bridges between paganism and Christianity. In an era when the pilgrimage from a philosophical system to another was seen as a norm and a necessity due to anger to the teachers of that time, joining the Christian religion implied a different choice. Persecution

against Christians, in a paradoxical way, was meant to strengthen Christian faith and the example of the martyrs has helped in converting pagans to Christianity.

Chapter II is entitled *Considerations regarding conversion to Christianity in antiquity*, having as sub-chapters issues regarding the conversions to Christianity, the pagans from antiquity, misunderstanding the Christian religion, non-Christian authors talking about Christianity. Looking carefully at the spread of Christianity in the first centuries, we find out that Christianity has benefited greatly from a great advantage, which resulted from the fact that the new religion was revealed, but pagans were not aware of this: Christianity was simple, was not complicated, it directly to the soul and heart, bringing in centre the faith in the Almighty God and the care for salvation that brings eternal life as a reward. If we look at the theological Christianization, at least until the fourth century, all who wanted to be baptized Christian had to go through the respectable institution of the catechuminate, where they were taught Christian dogmas and evangelical principles. Sometimes and unfortunately, in the history of Christianity, the component of sincere belief or religious acts didn't play a big role. The influences such as pseudo-religious, social, cultural, political, economic and even military were of major interest. Many conversions were carried out in the Christian Church, outside the religious side, because of other factors that influenced the conversion as imperial edicts, some of the civic constraints or any other constraints. Pagan Religion is a complex of systems and practices, non-uniform and difficult to understand today because it has not been maintained until nowadays any Greco-Roman cult. All we know is based on ancient sources, which we seldom find detailed descriptions of pagan worship. Religious formation of pagan authors and their writings influenced the pagan religion, and thus affect our perception about contemporary paganism. Usually, pagan writers were not ordinary people, they formed the elite pagan society, people like Plutarch and Apuleius. Unlike their contemporaries, they had superior education, a vast culture, so their pagan faith differed from that of ordinary people. Pagans believed that everyone has the right to honour what God wants and held this diversity, so monotheism and Christian exclusivism offended many. Some pagans even if they admitted the existence of a supreme deity, believed that God may be honoured even if other gods are present in people's lives. From the theoretical charges, brought to the Christians in some pagan works and until the conviction of the Christian was not only a small step. Roman law didn't punish atheism, but the Christian atheism was disturbing for the pagans. Nor in the cities atheism was punished, the local magistrates didn't take into account such allegations. The idea of a single god, other than anthropomorphic gods of the Greco-Roman tradition, was not new to the Romans. There are several ancient classical authors who share this vision but in a henotheist system. Pagans had a completely different understanding of religious terminology than Christians, even if some words were identical. Some pagans harder accepted the Saviour divinity because of His humble life, as they would have expected something else, according to the conception pagan gods greatness. Many pagans did not understand the Christian religion, either because they have not sought to approach it with an open heart, either because of distortions on sources that they sought. The best option was to read the Holy Scripture and the writings of the early church, but Christians didn't give such writings to people who were not even catechumens. Reception of the Christian message by pagans depended very much on the qualities and preparation of the gospel Christian, whether apostle, catechist or simply zealous Christian priest. The Romans were extremely curious to develop any new religion so most cults were brought in Rome. To Christianity, pagans felt frustrated because Christian worship was reserved exclusively to Christians. Just as Christians weren't well aware of many aspects of pagan religion, which they took ridicule, pagans did not know the beauty of Christian worship, judging things the wrong way and slanderous.

The third chapter is entitled *The Evolution of Church and Christianity during the persecution of Diocletian*, with the chapters The tetrarch in the Roman Empire and the personality of Diocletian, Diocletian and its religious policy, Christian martyrs heroism during Diocletian. Diocletian sought to reform the Roman state not for personal ambition, but for the future of the empire for which he had a profound awe. His abdication in 305 and because he shared the power with many others show that Diocletian wasn't a lover of absolute imperial power. The management system of imperial thought Diocletian showed unselfishness of those who was ready to share power with three other absolute monarchs Diocletian wished at death or withdrawal of one of Augusta, called Caesar chose to take his place and be elected in his place another Caesar. Respecting this hierarchy, the power should be followed to submit peacefully, without plots and assassinations that had shaken Roman state nearly a century. If Diocletian intentions, political and military actions saved the Roman state from collapse, the moral and religious nature of the king caused, without wanting larger disorder than he might be thought. Romans politicians with the same interests as Diocletian also strongly believed that Christianity does not deserve any appreciation, Christianity must be maintained outlawed and Christians could be forced to return to the old religion. Diocletian not confined to apply the edict of persecution only in the provinces managed by him and his son in law, but he sent letters to Maximian and Constantius, ordering them to follow suit. The only Christians historians of the time who lived the great persecution were Eusebius from Caesarea in Palestine and Lactantius. The martyr death of those who had the courage to confess their Christian faith was described by eyewitnesses that future generations have the vivid memory of the sacrifice of Christians during the great persecution. After applying strict edicts of persecution in the years 303 and 304, even those who were charged with carrying out the imperial commandments were fatigued with the uninterrupted carnage so since the second half of the 304 the death sentences were changed. The persecution edicts between 303 and 304 took the Christian by surprise; therefore, in a more or less manner, many clerics and Christians abnegate it, being named *lapsi* after the cessation of the persecution.

The last chapter, the fourth, is dedicated to the *Church in Late Antiquity; considerations on the spread of Christianity*, with the chapters from the Greco-Roman religion to Christianity, written evidence about the spread of Christianity after the fourth century, the role of women and slaves to Christianity, religious tolerance and religious fanaticism in Late Antiquity. The transition from old to new, from ancestors religion to the new religion came from Judea, from animal sacrifices to Christian bloodless sacrifices, from multiple gods to one God, is the most important event of late Antiquity. An empire essentially pagan who did not exhibit tolerance to a religion that loves a crucified man by the procurator Pontius Pilatus, which his disciples claimed to be the Son of God, ended up adopting this religion without any probationary period. Constantine's predecessors' favoured pagan religion that was present in all strata of Roman society. Constantine and his sons favoured the Church, through direct support, financially, economically and politically. Measures taken by Christian Roman emperors through edicts, some governor's zeal, the enforcement against non-Christian and heretical writings, made possible the survival of "orthodox" books and the destruction of pagan or heretical writings. Although the imperial and ecclesiastical authorities strove to disappear the unwanted books and considered dangerous, even in the remaining writings, written by unconvict Church authors, made internal and external changes, so that unwanted or hard to accept events not be presented as such. If the women had an unenviable social status in classic pagan antiquity, for Romans and Greeks, Christianity has attached greater appreciation of women, based on the teachings and the words of Christ and having as model the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Therefore, women and slaves were the most attracted social category by Christianity in the Roman state, even if

women and slaves had certain freedoms in the pagan religion, too. In numerical terms, the majority of the people converted to Christianity, at least in classical antiquity, came from the ranks of women and slaves. If Christians from I-III centuries have felt persecuted and misunderstood, it was the turn of pagans to feel the same in a Christian Roman state which had become intolerant with the old religion of the founders of Rome. Of big interest in the relation between Christians and pagans was the issue of religious tolerance yet starting with the 2nd Century. Christian apologists were the first who understood the need for a good cohabitation between the Roman state and the Christian religion. Galerius's edict opened a new page in the behaviour of Roman emperors to Christianity, although the persecution hasn't stopped. In general, most modern historians believe that after the Mediolanum proclamation of the Christian religion, the spreading of the new religion during late Antiquity, did not encounter great resistance from paganism.