Conversions

Within *The Man of Law’s Tale*, Chaucer details the journey of a young Christian woman named Constance. As she is cast to and fro across Europe, usually by the direct will or action of another person, Constance remains ever-faithful to the Judeo-Christian God. She is the embodiment of patience and contentedness, always believing that God will guide her on the “correct” path, and keep her safe from harm. These traits prove incredibly useful to Constance - throughout the tale her friends and family continuously cast her off, forcing her to journey across vast oceans and distant lands for their own reasons or gains. Her father weds her to the Syrian Sultan against her will, converting the foreigner to Christianity in the process, but Constance is patient and faithful in the Lord throughout this venture. After watching the murdering of her beloved Constance is sent out to sea once more, trusting in God to guide her rudderless boat as it drifts across the ocean. Her craft lands on the shores of Northumbria, where she is immediately taken in by a friendly couple, who are soon converted through the miraculous deeds that accompany Constance’s faith. Eventually Constance finds herself in the presence of another ruler, converting him, too, through a divine miracle that saves her life. Throughout the tale Constance’s sole mission is to peacefully and purposefully spread the word of God, attempting to convert others to Christianity by living as a shining example of a patient and devoted disciple. By comparing and contrasting Syrian and Northumbrian cultures, Chaucer depicts the various forms of resistance that Christians encountered when trying to convert their heathen neighbors, and underhandedly questions the prominence of one religion over another, and the reasons that accompany religious beliefs..

Constance’s first trial comes when she is sent to Syria in an arranged marriage with the Sultan who resides there. Though she is quite afraid of the future that lies ahead, her fear is outweighed by her trust in God, believing that He will protect her. The narrator notes:

By cause that ther was swich diversitee

Bitwene hir bothe lawes, that they say

They trowe that no "Cristen prince wolde fayn

Wedden his child under oure lawe sweete

That us was taught by Mahoun, oure prophete." (220-224)

Despite the differences in belief systems, the Sultan prioritizes Constance over his own religion, and converts in order to have her hand in marriage. The Sultan does not prize his faith in the way that Constance and his mother do, and this wavering of faith ultimately proves to be his downfall. Meanwhile, his mother is less than pleased with this action. She cries in outrage:

What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe

But thraldom to oure bodies and penance,

And afterward in helle to be drawe,

For we reneyed Mahoun oure creance?(337-340)

Keeping in mind that the Sultaness is referred to as the “roote of iniquitee”, a disparity has arisen amongst the Syrian people. While the Sultan is ready to embrace a foreign religion out of sheer love for the beautiful Constance, his mother, and many of her followers, are representative of the population that does not support this decision, fearing the retribution that Muhammad will have upon them for this heretical act. This problematic situation results in a horrific slaughter at the wedding feast, when the Sultaness’ intentions are revealed

This olde Sowdanesse, cursed krone,

Hath with hir freendes doon this cursed dede,

For she hirself wolde al the contree lede. (432-434)

While Constance holds fast to her beliefs out of genuine trust and hope, the Sultaness uses religion as a tool to further her own plots, hoping to rule over Syria. While it initially seems that the Syrians have opened their hearts and minds to the Christian way of life, this acceptance is entirely based around Constance’s beauty, which proves an unstable reason that causes more harm than good. The Syrians are eventually punished for their acts against Constance, and therefore God; Romans eventually strike them down in retribution, but not before Constance is sent out on the next leg of her journey.

When Constance crash lands on the shore of Northumbria, she is quickly greeted by a couple known as the Constable and lady Hermegyld. Though they are quickly identified as Pagans, lady Hermengyld accepts and cares for Constance:

This constable and dame Hermengyld, his wyf,

Were payens, and that contree everywhere;

But Hermengyld loved hire right as hir lyf (533-535)

Constance develops a friendship with the two, and converts lady Hermengyld to Christianity through her example as a perfect disciple of God. Though Hermengyld fears her husband’s reaction to her conversion, he too is converted when he witnesses Constance perform a miracle upon a blind man. However, like Syria, this country is full of non-Christians, who are less than thrilled with the prospect of conversion:

In al that lond no Cristen dorste route;

Alle Cristen folk been fled fro that contree

Thurgh payens, that conquereden al aboute (540-542)

Despite being surrounded by more heathens, Constance remains loyal to her cause. When a jealous knight attempts to frame her for murdering the kind Hermengyld, her faith saves her yet again when God obliterates the knight after he falsely swears over the bible. This direct act of intervention, coupled with Constance’s example, is enough for the Northumbrians to accept the Christian God as true. King Alla takes Constance to be his own wife, and though they are eventually separated through deception, he remains faithful to the God that blessed him. He even seeks penance after killing his mother for her meddling, remaining true to his new faith:

**In heigh and logh, and Jhesu Crist bisoghte**

**Foryeve his wikked werkes that he wroghte. (993-994)**

Though the Northumbrians require miracles and Constance’s shining example to incite their conversion, it is depicted as a more genuine and honest acceptance of religion than that of the Syrians, as they hold true to their new Christian values even after the departure of Constance.

Within *The Man of Law’s Tale*, Chaucer contrasts the process of conversion via the Syrian and Northumbrian societies. The Syrians, while seemingly religious, actually employ religion to further their own Earthly gains; the Sultan converts in order to marry the beautiful Constance, while his mother uses Islam to incite a rebellion, with the ultimate goal of ruling Syria herself. By comparison, the kind folk of Northumbria are genuine in their acceptance of Christianity; Hermengyld, the Constable, and King Alla are all amazed by the miracles that protect and guide Constance as she travels through dangerous lands. Though the conversion of the Northumbrians is “more successful”, they only convert after experiencing a miracle or act, and do not possess the unconditional faith and trust that Constance does. In this way, Chaucer explores the many reasons - personal, social, political, and otherwise - that accompany the development and maintenance of a faith, and underscores the many insincerities that can potentially undermine this incredibly important and powerful aspect of life.