

# Cavafy and the End of Christianity

## in the Near East

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What happened to **Christianity** and **Hellenic** culture in the Near East? Why is there so little evidence of both today? These are 2 topics that preoccupied **Constantine P. Cavafy** (1863-1933), the **greatest Greek poet** of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, Cavafy reflected much on the decline of classical civilization and the passing of **Christianity** and **Hellenic** culture in **Anatolia** [*Greek since antiquity; now Turkey*] in particular and eastern Mediterranean, in general.



Since Cavafy was a poet, rather than a historian, he approached these subjects from the perspective of real life people, looking at **historical developments** through the eyes of ordinary men and women caught in the **churning of time**.

In the great poem, “**Simeon**”, he introduces us to the spread of the **Christian faith** by focusing on the lives of three people. The speaker is talking to his friend, Mevis, about a wonderful sight he had just witnessed, St. Simeon Stylites, the man who lived on top of a pillar. Cavafy locates us in Syria at about 454 AD, **35 years after Simeon ascended on the pillar** in a great act of devotion to God. As pagans, the speaker and his friend cannot really understand such an undertaking of **self-denial and dedication**. “*I slipped in among the Christians/ praying and worshipping in silence there,/ revering him. It jostles their world slightly askew. “For thirty-five years ... winter and summer, night and day,... he’s been living, suffering on top of a pillar.”* The speaker trembles and shudders at the spectacle of a man, “*facing God.*”

Who is this man and what type of faith can provoke such acts of piety and zeal? These were the questions that people were asking in the fifth century as **Christianity** was gradually winning more adherents. But this situation would not last forever in this region. Cavafy moves us forward a couple centuries in **Alexandria** around 870, the renowned Hellenistic city that was captured by the Arabs in 641. His poem “Exiles” looks at the tumultuous events of the time from the point of view of **Byzantine Greeks**, who have found refuge in **Alexandria** from the political turmoil in Constantinople after the overthrow of the Byzantine emperor Michael III (842-867) by Basil I (867-886). These exiles marvel at the glories of this once celebrated city: “*It goes on being Alexandria,*” they say. “*Just walk a bit/ along the hippodrome/ and you will see palaces and monuments that will amaze you.*” But they also admit that the city has become smaller, damaged by war, having lost its central place in the world.

But they pass the time pleasantly, enjoying Alexandria’s monuments, talking about **Greek literature** “*with the few other Greeks still left in the city.*” Their time here, they think is temporary for they will defeat Basil and return to Constantinople. Yet Cavafy releases his irony here. For Basil stayed in power for nearly 20 years. How wrong they were! Worse still for these exiles Alexandria continued to change, becoming **less Hellenic** each year, with fewer and fewer Greeks.

The world around them was transformed in a way these refugees could never understand. **Byzantium** itself would **contract** after its heyday, shrinking back to the city of Constantinople. This is the subject of a short poem by Cavafy “**Theophilos Palaiologos**,” a relative of Constantine XII

Palaiologos, **the last Byzantine Emperor**, who was given command by the emperor of the troops defending the Gate of Silyvria during the siege of 1453.

Standing at the gates of Constantinople on **Tuesday, 29 May 1453** as the Turks rush in, we look at **Theophilos Palaiologos**, fighting along his emperor to save their city and a way of life. But Theophilos was killed and the city was taken.

How the world changed since the time the two pagans shuddered at the sight of Simeon’s great act of sacrifice. There the pagans shake at the arrival of a religion that seems so inexplicable to them. In “Theophilos Palaiologos” the inhabitants of Constantinople are

terrified at the conquest of their city by the Turks and their new religion, **Islam**.

This is the last year, this the last  
of the Greek emperors. And, alas,  
how sadly those around him talk.  
Kyr Theophilos Palaiologos  
in his grief, in his despair, says:  
“I would rather die than live.”

Ah, Kyr Theophilos Palaiologos,  
How much of the pathos, the yearning of  
our race,  
How much weariness—  
Such exhaustion from injustice and  
persecution –  
Your six tragic worlds contained.

The **genius of Cavafy** lies in his ability to talk about these earth-shaking developments in only a couple of stanzas. He makes history come alive for us by honing his camera lens, so to speak, on individuals caught in the **waves of history**, tossed here and there by forces they don't really comprehend. As time goes on, Cavafy is there to record these events for us, offering us the **pathos of people living in fascinating times**.



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