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We are compelled to attempt what is unattainable, to climb where we cannot reach, to speak what we cannot utter. Instead of the bare adoration of faith, we are compelled to entrust the deep things of religion to the perils of human expression.

HILARY OF POITIERS

It is evident that all doctrine which agrees with those apostolic churches, the wombs and origins of the faith, must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing what the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God.

TERTULLIAN, *THE RULE OF FAITH*

The Father is one, the Word who belongs to all is one, the Holy Spirit is one. And one alone, too, is the virgin mother, I like to call her the church.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

I want to be a man of the church; I do not want to be called by the name of some founder of a heresy.

ORIGEN

Church-State Relations: The Impact of the Constantinian Revolution



Graham Keith

In an important work on Islam in the modern world, Professor Bernard Lewis has argued that the idea of a separation between religious and political authority, or between church and state, "is, in a profound sense, Christian." He contrasts Christianity with the older religions of mankind, which "were all related to—were in a sense a part of—authority, whether of the tribe, the city, or the king." He continues, "The cult provided a visible symbol of group identity and loyalty; the faith provided sanction for the ruler and his laws."¹

Lewis bases his view on the long period in which the pre-Constantinian church found itself a persecuted religion, regularly at odds with the imperial authorities. He recognizes that during this time the church developed its own structures of authority, its own courts and laws. And certainly by the third century within the Roman Empire no other religious group had quite the same power within its own sphere as the Christian bishops. Taking a broad overview of the emergence of Christianity, Lewis goes on to point out that at a later stage in its development the persecution inflicted by some churches on others merely reinforced the importance of the distinction between religious and political authority.

The church's experience with the Emperor Constantine and his immediate successors will shed light on Lewis's

observations. Constantine emerged from that class of Roman military rulers who in the Great Persecution of 303-313 made a final attempt to extirpate Christianity. They were motivated largely by religious considerations; they held that the well-being of the Empire was bound up with the honoring of its traditional deities—deities who embodied the grandeur of Rome and the authority of the Caesars in exactly the way described by Lewis for the older religions of humanity. Interestingly, Constantine himself was also persuaded of the link between Roman peace and divine blessing. Only that blessing came from the exclusive Christian God, not from the traditional Roman gods. In this view he was encouraged by the practice of the church over its long years of persecution. Christians had claimed that their disobedience to the Emperors was strictly limited to religion.² They had no quarrel with paying their taxes; they readily prayed for the Emperor especially in his role of protecting the Empire from strife both inside and outside its borders. Constantine could expect loyal support and prayers from Christians in the Empire, who were incidentally still very much in the minority. At the same time Constantine not only acknowledged but cherished the exceptional powers which up to this point Christians had vested in bishops.

All this made for an intriguing combination of factors. Would Constantine use his power to persecute pagan worshippers in the way his predecessors had against Christians? What use would Constantine make of episcopal power? Would he so direct the role of bishops that they would take on a secular function, perhaps even becoming ministers of state? Or would they in effect become a law unto themselves, answerable to no one else because they had come to hold an exalted position in society?

CONSTANTINE'S RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT

First, it would be helpful to set Constantine in a wider context because he remains a controversial, if fascinating, figure. Gone are the days when the cynicism of Jakob Burckhardt ruled among scholars.³ Hardly anyone now believes

that Constantine embraced Christianity for the exclusively political reason that he calculated Christians would lend him vital support in his bid for supreme power. Religious factors did weigh with Constantine. But this leads to further questions—When did Constantine espouse Christianity? What sort of Christianity did he pursue?⁴

I will sketch out my view on Constantine as a Christian. Constantine began publicly to profess allegiance to the Christian God in the context of a difficult campaign against an imperial rival, Maxentius, in 312, though his sympathies may well have been with Christianity several years before that. Against the odds, Constantine proved totally successful against Maxentius. Entering Rome in triumph, he did not ascend the Capitol to offer sacrifice to Jupiter, as his pagan predecessors would have done. In fact, from then on he always ascribed his considerable military victories to the Christian God. He began also to benefit churches, going well beyond the restoration of properties lost during the Great Persecution. He gave freely from the imperial treasury for the building and decoration of churches. He started to increase the status of clergy, who were now exempted from public liturgies and perhaps from all forms of direct taxation.⁵ At the same time he gained first-hand acquaintance of some of the difficulties of internal church disputes; he was called, as we shall see, to adjudicate in the Donatist dispute in Africa.

From 313 to 324 Constantine ruled over the West of the Roman Empire, while a colleague, Licinius, took charge of the East. Both adopted a policy of toleration toward all religious cults in the Empire⁶; Constantine even kept representations of the sun-god on his coinage up to 325. Eventually, Licinius, whose relations with Constantine had always been uneasy, began to harass Christians in his section of the Empire. This gave Constantine reason to parade as champion of the oppressed Christians and to go to war with Licinius. After his success, which effectively brought the whole of the Empire under his control, Constantine pursued more of an aggressively anti-pagan policy. Though the details of this are disputed, it seems clear that this stopped short of violent persecution.⁷ He

believed that religion should be a matter of free choice, and maintained a revulsion against the sort of coercive measures as had characterized the Great Persecution. He genuinely believed that this Persecution had caused such internal unrest as to endanger the break-up of the Roman Empire. He also accepted the thesis of the leading Christian writers of the day, Lactantius and Eusebius, that those Emperors who had persecuted the church had suffered condign and exemplary punishment at the hands of God. Given Constantine's own desire both for imperial unity and for the blessing of the true God, he ruled out the use of religious violence. This did not, however, stop Constantine from showing hostility to paganism in other ways, notably by ridicule. His public edicts derided idolatry as "the violent rebelliousness of injurious error." He even sent officials round pagan temples with powers to strip the statues of their gold and of anything else that was valuable. Not only did this expose the idols as crude and lifeless human creations; it also yielded important income to fill Constantine's coffers and to benefit the churches.⁸

Constantine was baptized only in his final illness in 337. Some writers have found this suspicious, but there was a perfectly good reason for his delaying baptism.⁹ He wished to avoid post-baptismal sin, a reasonable enough fear when the church insisted of officials and even sometimes of soldiers that they be not involved in shedding blood. Constantine's late baptism does mean that his interventions in church affairs occurred when he had no status even as an ordinary communicant member of the church. On the other hand, the fact that Constantine died in full communion with the church enhanced his status with future generations.

THE AIMS OF CONSTANTINE AS CHRISTIAN EMPEROR

It is Constantine's edicts in the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of Licinius which perhaps most clearly reveal the goals of his imperial rule. This was the time when he found that the East had been thrown into turmoil by the Arian controversy. As this was already affecting the stability of the region, Constantine could not ignore it. In a letter

addressed jointly to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria and his opponent Arius, he revealed two distinct aims in his conquest of the East. One of these was the more narrowly political task of repairing the damage caused by the tyrannical behavior of Licinius, especially his harassment of the churches. At the same time Constantine planned to work for harmony between the churches. In particular, he hoped the Eastern churches might succeed where he had failed to sort out the Donatist schism in Africa. Instead, he was shocked to find that the Arian dispute was causing even greater rifts than the Donatists. Though Constantine offered himself as a "peaceful arbitrator" in the dispute, he made it clear that church harmony was for him a key political aim. His reason is simply stated: "I knew that if I were to establish a general concord among the servants of God in accordance with my prayers, the course of public affairs would also enjoy the change consonant with the pious desires of all."¹⁰ In other words Constantine was appealing to a notion of cosmic sympathy shared by many in his time. Times of moral or religious delinquency were often mirrored by times of upheaval in the state (through war, earthquake and the like).¹¹ And in very practical terms churches which were at odds with one another could hardly unite in prayer for the Emperor, his family and his rule.¹²

Ten years or so later, toward the end of his reign, we find Constantine reflecting the same two aims in a letter he sent to bishops who had just held a council at Tyre to decide the fate of Athanasius. Constantine can congratulate himself on the attainment of civil peace; in particular, the barbarians have been pacified and have come to respect the true God because of the military prowess with which he has endowed Constantine. It is, however, a different matter as far as peace in the churches is concerned: "we who pretend to have a religious veneration for . . . the holy mysteries of his church, we, I say, do nothing but what tends to discord and animosity, and to speak plainly, to the destruction of the human race."¹³ This did not mean that Constantine despaired of ecclesiastical harmony; it was another way of stating it was a priority he would never let slip, however difficult it might be to attain.

He did believe that his own honor and the good name of his God were at stake in the matter of Christian harmony. At the same time he considered himself to be advancing the best interests of his subjects. In fact, he shared views held by his pagan predecessors. One of them, in the 290s, had written in an official document:

For there can be no doubt that the immortal gods, as always friendly to Rome, will be reconciled to us only if we have provided that everyone within our realm pursues a pious and religious peace and a life thoroughly pure in all regards. . . . For our laws safeguard nothing but what is holy and venerable and it is in this way that the majesty of Rome, by the favour of all the divine powers, has attained such greatness.¹⁴

Pagan Roman Emperors held to a concept of a highly desirable *pax deorum* (peace of the gods) which was guaranteed only if traditional morality and religious rites were maintained. On occasions this had even been a factor in the persecution of Christians, because they were known to stand aloof from public religious rituals, which they generally interpreted as idolatry. It is little wonder that Constantine operated within the same framework of thought, and now looked for peace and prosperity from sole allegiance to the Christian God.

But there had been nothing within the pagan Roman world to correspond exactly to the sort of church harmony which Constantine believed was required among Christians. Inevitably it entailed more direct involvement in the internal affairs of the church than pagan Emperors had ever envisaged in the traditional Roman rites. There would be a real danger of Christian Emperors assuming powers within the church which were not properly theirs.

SEEKING CHURCH UNITY

Going back to his early days as a professing Christian, Constantine did not have to wait long before he encountered considerable practical problems in his hopes for a united church. It was fine for the Emperor to decree benefactions

and immunities for the churches in his part of the Empire; but what if there was a dispute as to who were to be recognized as the appropriate group of Christians? This transpired in Africa, where in the aftermath of the Great Persecution two rival churches had emerged which became known as the Donatists and Catholics.¹⁵ The Donatists disputed the consecration of the Catholic Bishop Caecilian to the most important see of Carthage, claiming he was effectively polluted by one of the bishops in his consecration, a man who had purportedly compromised himself in the Great Persecution. Neither the Emperor nor the rival churches contemplated recognizing two different churches (or denominations) in the same place. Someone had to adjudicate between them. The Donatists first appealed to Constantine to convene the Gallic bishops (as they had not been affected by the Great Persecution) to decide the legalities of the situation.

Constantine did not follow the Donatist proposal exactly but sought an adjudication from the Bishop of Rome along with three other bishops whom he designated. For his part, the Bishop of Rome did not adhere strictly to Constantine's suggestion. He summoned fifteen Italian bishops in addition to those nominated by the Emperor, in effect forming a sort of local council. This council, under the presidency of the Bishop of Rome, and a subsequent Gallic Council at Arles, both found in favor of Caecilian and against the Donatists. Nothing daunted, the Donatists appealed directly to the Emperor to adjudicate. Constantine was shocked. His response reveals a high view of church councils:

They demand my judgement, who am myself waiting for the judgement of Christ. For I say—and it is the truth—that the judgement of priests ought to be regarded as if the Lord himself sat in judgement. . . . They seek the things of the world, abandoning heavenly things. What frenzied audacity! As is done in the eyes of the pagans, they have interposed an appeal.¹⁶

Here Constantine accepts the view that had become standard in the church by this time that the verdict of bishops in

council is to be treated as the verdict of God himself.¹⁷ And yet the surprising thing is that Constantine himself eventually decided to hear the appeal. Again, the verdict went against the Donatists.

Despite reaching an impasse as far as legal proceedings were concerned, the Donatists were not of a mind to submit to the Emperor's verdict and accept the Catholic Church. As a result, for a period of five years (316 to 321) Constantine tried to coerce the Donatists into submission, but as this proved quite unsuccessful, Constantine tired of it. Remarkably, under the ecclesiastical policy of Constantine it was better to be a pagan than to be a heretic or schismatic; at least a pagan would escape coercion.¹⁸

There were some precedents for the way the Donatist dispute was handled, since c.270 Christians had petitioned (successfully) the Emperor Aurelian for the return of a building which an heretical bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata, was occupying in defiance of his deposition.¹⁹ What was novel, however, was the extent to which Constantine was prepared to go in pursuit of his desired aim of church harmony. So highly did he rate this that he was prepared, in practice, to set aside his own view of church councils as reflecting the voice of God and to deal personally with disputed church questions—and that when he had no status within the church. Clearly he viewed himself as holding some unique role from God. It would be going too far to view this as a calling since in his recorded letters he speaks more in negative terms of a responsibility hanging over him, the neglect of which will leave him open to the wrath of God. Needless to say, it was very difficult for the churches to object to this use of imperial power. Probably at this early stage, so soon after the church had acquired a patron rather than a persecutor on the imperial throne, it did not occur to any of the churches to complain. They had pedalled the notion of God's anger against the previous Emperors who had persecuted the church. When Constantine claimed his fear of God's anger if he did not exert his very considerable power to ensure unity within that church, the churches had left very little ground for possible

objection.²⁰ But they had landed themselves with a form of Caesaropapism where the Emperor was in effect deciding what was for the best interests of the church. The prominent historian T. D. Barnes, who considers the idea of Caesaropapism inappropriate at this point in time, may be formally correct in arguing that Constantine forbade provincial governors to cancel the decisions of episcopal synods.²¹ He may also be correct in insisting that neither Constantine nor any imperial official presided or exercised a voting role at any ecclesiastical synod.²² But there were other ways in which the Emperor could exercise decisive power. He had the power to summon councils not least by providing the resources to enable them to meet conveniently. He could also determine which councils were valid and in this way effectively annul their decisions.²³ That is not to deny that many councils would meet, especially at provincial level, without any interference from the Emperor; but given the imperial concern for church harmony, any decision which threatened this was likely to be reviewed by him.

There does seem to have been an element of groping around, for both Emperor and clergy, as to the correct procedure in the protracted Donatist dispute. This was only to be expected given that both parties needed time to adjust to a relatively novel situation. Yet, the pattern which Constantine set in the Donatist controversy, was to reappear in later ecclesiastical disputes, particularly in the East. The Arian Controversy is a case in point. Constantine aimed to secure harmony by summoning a great council to Nicaea. At the end of the council he believed he had attained his aim when it endorsed the Nicene Creed as a touchstone of orthodoxy and he banished the four clergy (two Libyan bishops along with the presbyters Arius and Euzoius) who would not subscribe to this creed.²⁴ But Constantine did not leave the decisions of Nicaea as a cut-and-dried affair. Again, he insisted on interfering when it seemed to him that circumstances had changed or new information came to light. In fact, machinations at court were largely responsible. Arius and Euzoius were able, for a time at least, to recover favor at court, and be

restored to communion with some bishops (though never in Egypt). To do this they submitted an uncontroversial creed, which omitted to say anything about the specific concerns of the Nicene Creed, and most importantly they affirmed their enthusiastic support of the goals of Constantinian religious policy. It is worth quoting the relevant section of their letter to Constantine because it encapsulates succinctly the main threads of that policy:

We entreat you in your devoutness, most God-beloved emperor, that we, who are clerics holding the faith and sentiments of the Church and the holy Scriptures, may be united to our mother the Church through your peacemaking and reverent devoutness, with all questions put aside, and all the word-spinning arising from these questions, so that both we and the Church, being at peace with each other, may all make together the proper and accustomed prayers for your peaceful and devout rule, and for all your family.²⁵

Here we can see one result of Constantinian policy or indeed any government policy which involves the internal affairs of the church. It created a group of clergy who learned how to curry favor and win power at the centers of government by trumpeting (whether sincerely or hypocritically) those aims the government was pursuing. In Constantine's reign rival groups of bishops got into the act with the result that for the rest of his reign he was regularly adjusting the relations between different clerical factions in the East. The situation only worsened after his death when for a time the Empire was divided among his sons. Then there were different courts which might well espouse different policies from one another. In the 340s, for example, the Western Emperor Constans even went to the extent of threatening war on his brother Constantius II if he did not restore Athanasius to his see in Alexandria and another bishop called Paul to the see of Constantinople.²⁶ In the event the war did not take place; but the memory of this lingered with Constantius II when he gained full control of the whole of the Empire. Then he used

his power to push through a policy of creedal unity and clerical harmony between East and West. This policy, however, was attended with such coercion and such deviousness on the part of Constantius' advisers at court and among the bishops that the whole idea of an ecclesiastical harmony emanating from the court began to look somewhat tarnished.²⁷

Indeed, it was during the latter part of Constantius' reign that we first encounter protests from Christians that the Emperor had overstepped the mark and was interfering in matters reserved to the bishops. The protests involved a number of issues but related especially to Constantius' insistence on presiding at ecclesiastical trials and on using officers of state to enforce the verdicts for which he was largely responsible. Athanasius, for example, tells of an incident when a number of Western bishops were summoned to his court and ordered by Constantius to subscribe against Athanasius and at the same time hold communion with his ecclesiastical enemies. When the Western bishops protested that such a procedure was novel and uncanonical, the Emperor promptly replied, "But what I wish must be regarded as a canon; the bishops of Syria let me speak in this way."²⁸ Constantius' actions were probably exceptional in the directness with which he presided over ecclesiastical business and with which he would use coercion against bishops. Otherwise they simply intensified a trend begun by Constantine. Hanson's judgment is right—that in the fourth century no coherent theory was formed of the relation between church and state.²⁹ No ecclesiastical group can be found who either consistently objected to the Emperor meddling in ecclesiastical matters or tried to mark out due limits for such imperial intervention. Some did object to the practice if the Emperor made decisions against them. This includes the Donatists. The question of their leader, Donatus (from 347)—"What has the emperor to do with the church?"—has become famous; but it is often overlooked that this church body had been the first under Constantine to appeal to the Emperor against a decision of other Christians.³⁰

THE EMERGENCE OF BISHOPS AS A POWERFUL POLITICAL FORCE

Strange as it may seem, the increase in imperial interest in church affairs from Constantine and his successors was accompanied by a growth in the power of bishops. Christians with only a sketchy knowledge of this period are unaware of this. Yet, the emergence of bishops with virtually the status of local magistrates was one of the most significant legacies of the Constantinian revolution. This was not because bishops were appointed from the court (although that was an accusation leveled against some of the appointments made under Constantius II). On the contrary, the acclamation of the local congregation remained an important element in the choice of a new bishop. Alongside this the new bishop depended on the support of the bishops of neighboring churches who came to lay hands on the candidate at his consecration. These bishops represented not only their own churches but the universal church.³¹ All this remained essentially unaltered by Constantine and his successors. One change that did occur by a sort of natural development of the local, political role of the bishop was that episcopal elections often turned into violent contests which could end in injury or death. Little wonder that some bishops began to make provision for their successor before they died!³²

It was Constantine's own high regard for bishops that led to their emergence as a formidable force in society. I have shown that Constantine accepted a common view among Christians of the time that the agreement of bishops in council should be taken as God's own decision. More surprisingly, he took a similar view of the judgment of a single bishop at a local level; for Constantine even allowed a civil case to be transferred to an episcopal court at the request of either party, and enacted that there was to be no appeal from the bishop's decision. When an amazed magistrate, who happened to be a Christian, asked Constantine whether he really meant the bishop's decision to be final, the Emperor not only gave an affirmative answer but insisted that the magistrate had the

responsibility to see that the verdict was implemented. The two reasons he provided are significant. One concerned evidence; there was a wider scope of admissible evidence in a bishop's court. Then, the bishop was a holy man capable of discerning the hearts of men; there would be no need for a secular court to correct his verdict.³³ We can only speculate from where Constantine derived his high view of bishops and their powers. To some extent he was reflecting an attitude, though not a universal attitude, within the church; but I wonder if he was mirroring an earlier experience of his own when he believed some bishop had surmised the secrets of his own heart. It may be significant that in the important campaign against Maxentius, in which Constantine began to proclaim his allegiance to the Christian God, he was accompanied by Ossius, bishop of Corduba, who was to act as his advisor in the early years of his reign.³⁴ Later, Constantine regularly delighted in the company of bishops and addressed them in his letters as "beloved brothers."³⁵ He may even have conceived of himself as a type of bishop. At one dinner party he apparently told a group of bishops, "You are bishops of those within the Church, but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside."³⁶ In this he seems to have meant that he felt a responsibility to encourage pagans to the worship of the true God; it is interesting that he nowhere claimed power within the church.

Certainly, bishops were no strangers to judicial responsibilities; but before Constantine only within the context of their own flock. By the third century bishops would assemble with their presbyters to hear disputes among their flock; this was their way of handling the Pauline teaching in 1 Corinthians 6 forbidding Christians from going to law before unbelievers. Bishops also had a very important role to play in controlling moral delinquency among their people. It was they who determined whether penance was necessary and when it had been satisfactorily fulfilled.³⁷ There are some indications before Constantine's time that the bishop could increasingly be viewed like a secular magistrate. One of the complaints lodged against Paul of Samosata, the Bishop of Antioch in

270, was that he was behaving like a high official of state. In particular, he had a tribunal and an elevated throne as well as a group of secretaries like a provincial governor.³⁸ (Paul could get away with this because Antioch had slipped for a short time outside the Roman Empire.) At the time that was thought inappropriate but it may well have been a straw in the wind pointing to what might happen if a bishop need no longer fear the anger of the civil magistrate.

These legal changes undoubtedly affected the position of the bishop in local society. His powers were enhanced by the fact that imperial benefactions to the clergy and especially to the wider community were given in the first instance to the bishop who was then expected to pass them on to the relevant people.³⁹ The results were mixed. On the positive side an episcopal court would show an overriding concern for reconciliation between the parties, above that of strict justice. This was counterbalanced by a grave increase in the bishop's workload. Conscientious bishops like Augustine felt that the burden of dealing with such cases distracted from more central and spiritual issues.⁴⁰ They would echo Jesus' own protest to the man who asked him to get his brother to share his inheritance: "Man, who appointed me a judge or arbiter between you?"⁴¹ And of course, where local disputes were involved, there was the real danger that the bishop would end up pleasing neither party and therefore incurring odium. Equally there were other bishops who relished their new role and we find as the fourth century progressed instances of bishops calling upon the civil authorities to use violence on local heretics or schismatics.⁴² Unsurprisingly, the new role assumed by the bishops found critics within the church. The most powerful criticism derived from the ascetic movement, which was complex in motivation but undoubtedly embraced a protest that the urban churches and their leaders had become too worldly. "Flee from women and bishops" was an early monastic maxim reflecting that the view that both the honor and the responsibilities surrounding a bishop's office were a distraction from the truly spiritual life.⁴³ This was especially true in the East. Relations between ascetics and bishops in the West were on

the whole happier, partly because asceticism arrived later and partly because of the moderating role of Augustine.⁴⁴

Constantine, therefore, contributed to the growth in power and to a change in role for the bishops. Henceforth bishops in the more prestigious sees had political clout that could not be ignored. They were also privileged in that they could only be tried by their peers.⁴⁵ T. D. Barnes could even describe the bishop's power in these terms:

The Christian bishop . . . possessed ascribed status, his authority was inherent in his office, and he was at the center of a web of local patronage. His position thus conferred upon him a very real political power which enabled a man who knew how to exploit it to defy the emperor who in theory ruled the Roman Empire.⁴⁶

There is some exaggeration in these last words which have in mind Athanasius, who was bishop of a metropolitan see, Alexandria, and by any account an unusual and formidable personality. After all, whatever Athanasius' own powers in Egypt, they did not prevent him being exiled five times, though Barnes does show that two different Emperors (Constantius II and Valens) would not risk an attempt at banishing Athanasius when they were faced with a challenge of a usurper.⁴⁷ Such was the level of popular support Athanasius could command in Egypt. Barnes has presented just one side of the story. It would be equally true to say that as the bishops became more powerful figures they were more open to attack, not least from episcopal colleagues. The fourth century is littered with instances of charges being brought by bishops against their fellows.⁴⁸ The unity of the pre-Constantinian church which was built on the mutual fellowship and interaction of the bishops was seriously damaged. Ironically, in his promotion of harmony in the churches through removal of dissent among the bishops, Constantine and his successors achieved the very reverse.

CONSTANTINE—THE CASE FOR LEGITIMATE INTERVENTION IN CHURCH AFFAIRS

Often the interests of church and state are pictured historically in opposition to one another. A renewal of state interest in the church is usually accompanied by a decrease in the church's control over its own affairs. The reign of Constantine shows that this is a simplistic picture. Paradoxically, Constantine increased the level of imperial interference and enhanced at the same time the powers of the bishops, the leaders in the church. This combination was possible because of the monarchical government. Constantine could command his government officials to respect and enforce the decisions taken by bishops. Constantine remained the supreme authority.

There is no doubt that he laid the church open to a double danger—Caesar might encroach on the things of God and the bishops, as God's leading representatives, might encroach on the affairs of Caesar. Yet, Constantine acted from good motives. He was justifiably convinced that the policy of his predecessors in persecuting the church was a disastrous mistake; and he threw all his energies into its reversal. If he erred by interfering too much, that was an understandable error at a time when to have espoused neutrality would have been reprehensible, if not impossible. Under his predecessors, after all, Christianity had been declared illegal; its buildings in many places had been destroyed or confiscated; and many of its leaders were dead or compromised.

In fact, the case of Constantine illustrates the value of the distinction drawn by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1647 which endorsed the Westminster Confession of Faith. They insisted that they could accept some parts of Chapter 23, section 3, "only of Kirks not settled or constituted in point of government."⁴⁹ The relevant section reads:

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that

the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.

This General Assembly felt that once a ruler had re-established the synodical government of the church, he should then leave the church to function by itself and without interference. Constantine could have profited from such advice. He certainly did the church a great service at first by summoning synods (and synods on a larger scale than ever contemplated before) in order to sort out contentious matters of discipline and practice. But he would not leave the process to run its own course, especially if the results fell short of his ideals for the church.

The reason he kept interfering was less a fault of character than misguided expectations engendered by the notion of the *pax deorum* which he inherited and adjusted to the *pax dei*. He was sensitive enough to the evils of persecution that he realized there were limits to the extent to which he could go to woo his pagan subjects to Christianity. (Some of his successors, however, were less scrupulous.) It was a different matter when it came to the outward unity of the church on which he thought his own prosperity and that of the Roman Empire depended. No effort was spared to achieve this. Here, too, the practice under Constantine was less damaging than it became in medieval Christendom. There was nothing at this stage to compare with the later situation when an ecclesiastical tribunal would find people guilty of heresy and then hand them over to the secular authorities to be executed. But Constantine had paved the way for this when he told secular magistrates to enforce decisions taken by bishops. Insufficient weight was given to the differences between the power of the keys and the power of the sword. This too must lie behind Constantine's allowing the bishops to judge civil disputes.

In seeking outward unity among Christians Constantine was aiming at too high a goal. He did not appreciate the biblical teaching that in God's plan the church will be racked with heresies.⁵⁰ Imperial dictate could not override God's providence for the church, however strange that providence might be. The official teaching of the church at this time probably did not help. It was Augustine a century or so later who impressed on the wider church the lesson that the church in this world would always be a "mixed body" with wheat among the tares. Ironically, this lesson was emphasized repeatedly through the fourth century with violence becoming a regular part of church politics in the larger centers. And then, of course, the imperial authorities had no choice but to intervene out of their most basic duty to enforce law and order. There are clear dangers when issues of heresy and schism are politicized!

And yet it would not have been right for Constantine to jettison the whole notion of the *pax dei*—even in the unlikely event that it occurred to him to do so. In 1 Timothy 2 Christian congregations are urged to pray for their rulers so that a peace will prevail in which the Christian gospel can be spread and can be adorned by the peaceable lives of those who profess the faith.⁵¹ This, however, was based on very different principles from the *pax deorum* which embodied the *ex opere operato* notion that if only you gave the gods the right sort of worship, they would co-operate and bless you and your environment with peace and prosperity. The Emperor's role should have been more modest—to secure the peace and stability of the Empire at home and abroad and to solicit the prayerful support of Christian congregations toward these goals. As it was, maintaining the peace of the Empire was no easy task.

The case of Constantine does suggest that there will be occasions in the history of churches when a greater degree of government intervention will be desirable than normal. It is unwise to hold a static concept of the relation between church and state which pays no regard to historical realities. At the same time it is important for the church to be able to define

in broad terms what it expects from the secular ruler and at what time and in what ways it thinks that intervention should be limited. The fourth century church was ill prepared to set such guidelines. Though from the second century some Christians had evidently thought of the possibility of the Emperors becoming Christians, they had not considered what such Emperors should or should not do other than treat Christians justly and remove the stigma of criminality that hung over the profession of Christianity. They had little conceived that an Emperor might positively try to promote Christianity.⁵²

THE RECOGNITION OF INDEPENDENT ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY

Constantine did well to recognize independent ecclesiastical authority, which in his mind meant the bishops. Even if he did exaggerate that authority and did ascribe to bishops almost supernatural powers, this was a milestone in Roman history and so in the history of western civilization. For Constantine did establish on a constitutional footing the distinction between religious and political authority that for Bernard Lewis is one of the distinguishing marks of Christianity. We might quibble over his assigning such authority exclusively to monarchical bishops and feel it elevated them above their flocks in an unhealthy way, but Constantine cannot be blamed for this. The growth of monarchical episcopacy had already been underway for two centuries. Constantine was probably more responsible for involving the bishops in secular roles, like administering aid and dealing with judicial matters. That is not to suggest bishops began to neglect preaching; this continued to be valued at least to the sixth century.⁵³ But there did emerge a tension in the qualities which were sought in an effective bishop. This is illustrated by a fascinating remark attributed around the end of Constantine's reign to a dying Bishop of Constantinople who was asked by his clergy whom he wanted to succeed him. He declared, "If you seek a man good in spiritual matters and one who is apt to teach you, have Paul. But if you desire one who is conversant with public affairs, and with the councils of rulers, Macedonius is better."⁵⁴

Constantine also recognized the place of Christian professionals and so privileged the clergy, removing from them the burden of public service, on the understanding that they would be more free to devote themselves to their religious worship. (In this respect Christian clergy were put on a par with pagan priests, though Christian clergy would be proportionately more numerous since by this point the church had developed a host of minor clerical orders.) This was a significant benefit for the wealthier classes who might otherwise find themselves appointed to the supervision of a range of civic duties such as road repair, building and maintenance of public structures, and tax collection which might well bring heavy financial burdens on themselves.⁵⁵ Indeed, this enactment of Constantine made the clerical office so popular that he had later to issue an edict modifying the privilege. Future clergy were not to be ordained recklessly, but only to fill vacancies caused by death. Moreover, persons who belonged to families with local civic responsibilities or were wealthy enough to be made responsible were to be debarred from holy orders. He declared, "For the wealthy ought to support the requirements of this world, and the poor be maintained by the riches of the church."⁵⁶ Constantine had quickly learned that it was unwise to privilege the clergy without at the same time ensuring they acted with proper responsibility. Today, too, it is appropriate for the state to benefit Christian clergy, on the ground that in the performance of their duties they bring benefit to the state. But it is equally in the interests of both church and state to ensure these benefits are not abused.

Constantine brought such decisive changes to the church that it has proved difficult for subsequent Christian historians to maintain a proper balance in assessing him. At the one extreme there have been those who have seen Constantine as a quasi-messianic figure who was responsible for inaugurating a whole new era for the church. This trend was noticeable toward the end of Constantine's life with the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea, a particularly influential figure since he was the first person to write a history of the church. In the longer term, however, Eusebius has probably done untold

damage to his hero's reputation, in that sensitive Christians have been shocked to read of Constantine as a sort of earthly counterpart to the heavenly Messiah at God's right hand. These Christians have assumed (wrongly) that this is imperial propaganda, whereas it represents Eusebius' own viewpoint.⁵⁷

Because of this and because Constantine is associated rightly or wrongly with the emergence of Christendom, he has been demonized by writers of a very different perspective. As often as not, however, they reflect their assessment of general developments in the fourth century church rather than the contribution of Constantine himself. It remains very difficult to disentangle Constantine from the legacy he left. But if we consider the first Christian Emperor in his own historical context, we will appreciate the unusual needs of the church at the time he came to power. The remarkable thing is not that he intervened in church affairs but that he did so with such consistency and determination. In the process he made mistakes—mistakes of exaggerating the scope both of imperial and of episcopal power. But he did correctly recognize that episcopal power is of a different order to secular authority. And so it was that he bequeathed to the Roman Empire and its political successors that distinction between religious and political authority which has been so vital to both the church and the state in the West.

Author

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Notes

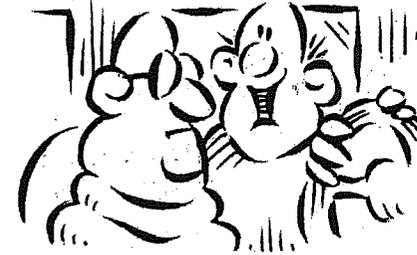
1. Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: London,

- 2002) 96-98. Lewis underplays Jewish antecedents for the distinction between political and religious authority.
2. Interestingly the only account of Christians using force against persecutors is in Dionysius of Alexandria's story of how he was rescued from government troops (recorded in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6:40).
 3. Jakob Burckhardt, *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen* (first edition, Basel, 1853); M.Hadas translator, *The Age of Constantine the Great* (London, 1949).
 4. A good starting-point amid the voluminous literature is the sixteenth article in Henry Chadwick's collection, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* (Variorum: Aldershot, 1991).
 5. Timothy D. Barnes, "The Constantinian Settlement," (Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata, editors) in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (E. J.Brill: Leiden, New York, Koln 1992) 646-47.
 6. As set out in the Edict of Milan—Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 10:5.
 7. A key document is recorded in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 2:48-60. For a useful starting-point in assessing the evidence see the notes to the translation of Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1999) at pages 243-48.
 8. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3:54.
 9. Chadwick, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church*, XVI:12, n. 49.
 10. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 2:64-65. I have used the translation of Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall.
 11. See also the thesis of the historian Socrates in *Ecclesiastical History*, 5:1. Henry Chadwick collects useful references to political dimensions of this idea in *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* XVI:3-4.
 12. See also 1 Timothy 2:8.
 13. Recorded in Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:34.
 14. *Codex Iustinianus* V:5,2.
 15. The standard history is W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford, 1951), though this is too sympathetic to the Donatists. For a good brief account of Constantine and the dispute see A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1972), 106-25.
 16. Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, Appendix 5. The translation is that of Jones in *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 118.
 17. Constantine took the same view of the council he had summoned to Nicaea. See his letter as recorded in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3:20.
 18. See also his letter against heretics recorded at Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4:64-65.
 19. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7:29-30.
 20. See also Constantine's letter recorded in Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 112-13.
 21. Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius* (Harvard University

- Press: Cambridge Massachusetts, and London, 1993), 172. This is a very important work, but Barnes almost entirely ignores the implications of the policy of Constantine and his successors toward the Donatists.
22. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 169.
 23. The comments of R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (T and T Clark: Edinburgh, 1988), 849-56 are more balanced on the role of the emperor throughout the fourth century than those of Barnes.
 24. On the Council of Nicaea, see Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 152-78.
 25. The translation is that of Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Darton, Longman and Todd; London, 1987), 256. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 73-75, gives an excellent account of the background to this restoration of Arius and Euzoius.
 26. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 88-91.
 27. For a good, brief account of this turbulent period see Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 271-94.
 28. Athanasius, *History of the Arians*, 33.
 29. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 854.
 30. Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 3:3.
 31. Chadwick, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* III: 1.
 32. Chadwick, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* III: 8-9.
 33. Chadwick, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* III, 6-7. Later emperors modified the rights given by Constantine. For details see David Hunt (Jill Harries and Ian Wood, editors) in *The Theodosian Code* (Duckworth: London, 1993), 152-55.
 34. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 87.
 35. Cameron and Hall (translators), Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 44.
 36. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 4:24.
 37. Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 207.
 38. Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 167.
 39. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 177-79.
 40. For Augustine's role as local judge and arbiter see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Faber and Faber: London, 1967) 194-98.
 41. Luke 12:14.
 42. See also the criticisms of the pagan emperor, Julian, in Letter 41 (to the citizens of Bostra).
 43. Chadwick, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* III: 12-13.
 44. On Augustine see the ninth article in Chadwick, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church*.
 45. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 172, though I cannot follow Barnes' suggestion that Constantine denied himself the right to try bishops.

46. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 179.
47. Barne, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 163.
48. On the steps that were taken to bring some order into these proceedings see Chadwick, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* III: 7.
49. For further details see James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1974 [reprint]), 179-80.
50. See also Matthew 24:24; Acts 20:29-31; 1 Corinthians 11:19; 2 Peter 2:1-3 for a selection of relevant passages.
51. This, of course, is not the only biblical passage that is relevant. There is the letter of Jeremiah to the Jewish exiles in Babylon in which they are commanded to pray for Babylon as their own prosperity is bound up in its prosperity.
52. See Chadwick, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* XIV:10-13 for some of the tensions in third century attitudes among Christians to political power.
53. Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (Darton, Longman and Todd: London, 1987), 110-12.
54. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3:3.
55. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 24.
56. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 205.
57. In fact, Eusebius met Constantine on comparatively few occasions and was not an intimate of his. Cameron and Hall (translators), *Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, 22-24.

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