Conclusion

This book has explored what it meant for post-Constantinian regimes to be not only ruled but also served by Christians. It has demonstrated that late fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-century regimes (eventually) placed new demands on the religious affiliations of office-holders, that contemporaries could envisage approaches to administration shaped by the demands of pious Christian commitment, and that office-holding resulted in participation in distinctive Christian observances and relationships with ecclesiastical authority figures. The preceding chapters have sketched the evolving contours of these Christian requirements, expectations, models, and aspirations for political service and tracked how they shaped the careers of officials across the major political environments of the Roman world in late antiquity. This has not been an attempt to argue that the late Roman state was populated by uniformly pious Christians who shaped their conduct of office around their religious convictions. I have not pressed the case that the religious beliefs and practices of these administrators should be understood as their most significant feature, whether in the eyes of their late ancient contemporaries or for modern historical analysis. Instead, I have argued that late fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-century officials were subject to distinctly Christian expectations of administrative office (whatever their own beliefs, practices, or attitudes). Above all, this book has sought to demonstrate that those Christian expectations of political service formed part of the mainstream of political culture in late antiquity.

Part I considered how developing requirements for (orthodox) Christianity fitted into the cultural norms of political institutions. As Chapter 1 showed, the appointment of co-religionists was rarely a primary consideration for emperors before the accession of Theodosius I. The religious uniformity of the imperial administration only became an explicit goal of Roman regimes once most of the empire's service aristocracy were Christian. But this was not simply a case of a self-evident aspiration pragmatically deferred. Systematic requirements for orthodoxy

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within the state emerged as a product of interlinked developments in the perception, categorisation, and proscription of religious difference under the Theodosian dynasty. Pagans, heretics, Jews, and Samaritans 'discovered' within the imperial administration were to be dismissed and punished alongside those complicit in their appointment and continued service. Such provisions became standard practice when fifth- and sixth-century regimes legislated against proscribed groups. Although these laws portrayed the whole tenure of heterodox officials as a problem, their solution was essentially reactive. Late fifth- and early sixth-century Eastern regimes went further by putting in place pre-emptive measures to ensure that their appointees had been 'instructed in the sacrosanct mysteries of orthodox religion'.[1] Accounts of (supposedly) pagan officials building churches and frequenting martyrs' shrines in Constantinople suggest the greater standards for conformity that resulted. They also document continuing anxieties over the possibility that the heterodox could obtain a 'surreptitious jurisdiction'.[2] Despite (and indeed because of) these anxieties, religious diversity can be seen in political institutions throughout this period. Chapter 2 showed that pursuit of ecclesiastical consensus resulted in similar personnel strategies with respect to ongoing doctrinal disputes in East and West. Eastern regimes were for the most part happy to appoint administrators of varying Christological proclivities so long as they 'shared the mind' of the emperor in public. Imperial attempts to formulate compromises acceptable to warring church factions in any case required doctrinal and ecclesiastical flexibility on the part of the emperor's representatives. In a similar way, Homoian regimes outside of post-Roman North Africa quietly shelved earlier anti-heretical legislation to allow for political service by members of 'the other confession'. Chapter 3 revisited the presence of (supposed) pagans, heretics, Jews, and Samaritans in imperial and royal service. It built on previous work that has convincingly demonstrated that orthodoxy remained just one consideration for those involved in appointing and evaluating imperial and royal officials. The precise framing of measures excluding 'enemies of the Catholic sect' suggests that this was not simply a question of late Roman laws not being enforced. Drafters focused on the potential for pagans, heretics, Jews, and Samaritans to protect their own and do harm to Christians. Recent work on the religious identities of the late Roman aristocracy has shown that this image of naked sectarian animus is a chimera. It is easy to see how those (potentially) heterodox officials who

[1] *CJ* 1.4.19. [2] *NTh* 3.2.

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were willing to uphold a Christian political dispensation could be accepted on these terms. All in all, Part I argued that we should not understand demands for orthodox Christian officials as an either/or. Requirements for religious uniformity within the state were contingent and shaped by the policies of specific regimes, the ethos of particular bureaux, and the qualifications and networks of individual office-holders. The religious beliefs, affiliations, and practices of appointees could certainly come into question, and governance by pagans, heretics, Jews, and Samaritans could be painted as inherently inferior. What late ancient regimes seem to have sought above all was active participation in the implementation of their version of correct religion. Again and again, attempts to ensure the appointment of orthodox Christians and exclude nonconformists turned on their capacity to engage in ecclesiastical business, enforce laws against religious error, and deal appropriately with Christian communities and authority figures. When push came to shove, what late ancient political institutions needed were not so much orthodox Christians as individuals who could be trusted to govern the church.

The pronouncements of late ancient regimes provide a remarkably limited view of the religious identities of their appointees. The exception to this broader picture is the legislation of Justinian, which portrayed imperial officials as accountable to God for their political conduct. The *Novels* of the sixth-century imperial systematiser did little more than codify the conventional wisdom of late ancient churchmen. Part II of this book delineated the much broader set of models upon which late ancient Christians drew to characterise political service. It documented widely shared views of the possibility for pious Christians to engage in worldly government. Revisionist work on religious change in late antiquity has tended to follow rigorist theorists of asceticism and classicising theorists of government in positioning political service as a world apart from the cultural assumptions of committed Christianity. Part II showed that these visions of pious renunciation and 'secular' bureaucracy – in both modern and more distinctly late ancient definitions of that term[3] – are just part of the picture. Chapter 4 traced discourses of pious office-holding across various genres of Christian literature from the late fourth to the late sixth centuries. It showed how the audiences and purposes of these letters, sermons, church histories, and saints' lives could lead their authors to characterise the authority of administrators in Christian terms. That

[3] For the disjuncture between modern and early medieval 'secular', see O'Brien (2021); (2022); (2024).

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officials were the implied readers and explicit addressees of many of these texts underlines their potential purchase on how those within the state thought about their authority and wished it to be presented. Chapter 5 aggregated this mass of surviving Christian literature to delineate recurring discursive frameworks regarding Christian political service. In pastoral terms, political service could be portrayed as one of the many 'gifts' that members of the church could use to live a good Christian life. Officials could be encouraged to keep doing what they had always done: only now, as morally upstanding Christians, they would be better equipped to traverse the ethical labyrinth of imperial governance. In providential terms, imperial or royal administration could be seen as a context in which to serve God through pious acts. Contemporaries overlaid bureaucratic hierarchies and processes with the workings of the heavenly kingdom. God appointed officials, helped them do their jobs well, scrutinised their conduct, and ensured they got their just rewards both on earth and at the Last Judgement. In ascetic terms, political service could be portrayed as a form of redemptive suffering. Biblical and early Christian advisers to persecuting rulers were adopted as types for service within the 'fiery furnace' of the palace and bureaucracy. The imperial state could also be seen as a particularly suitable (because obviously inhospitable) place for exceptional individuals to renounce the world. Christian writers articulated these visions of pious political service in texts written to and about serving imperial and royal officials. In some cases, we can corroborate how these ideas mapped onto these individuals' attitudes and practices as attested in other sources.[4] It is also possible to see officials presenting their own political agency according to these Christian cultural resources. In surviving texts, late fourth- and fifth-century officials for the most part pressed these ideas into service in literary and face-to-face exchanges with churchmen. Various sixth-century sources suggest that this frame of reference was increasingly used by imperial officials to characterise their authority to their subjects in general. Their claims to divine appointment, angelic protection, and Marian devotion demonstrate how forms of Christian political legitimation became part of the repertoire of officials, just as much as they came to reshape the public image of the rulers they served. Of course, the ideas of political service traced in these chapters were never separate from or independent of more traditional ways of seeing government (whether we call them 'classical', 'classicising', or 'secular'). But then again, neither were the Christian conceptions of the authority of any

[4] E.g. see 185–89 and 194–96 on Misael and Cassiodorus.

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number of other roles we might care to mention: emperors, kings, empresses, lords, bishops, abbots, ascetics, martyrs (and so on). In that regard, Part II of this book demonstrated that imperial and royal officials formed part of broader developments in late ancient Christian political thinking.

Serving the state brought with it a set of Christian ideas about office-holding that could be taken up by appointees and applied to them by their superiors, subordinates, and subjects. It also conditioned forms of religious practice and relationships with Christian communities and authority figures. Part III showed how service to the state in late antiquity made Christians who were in, but not of, the church. Chapters 6–8 traced patterns of official churchgoing in specific political and institutional contexts. We are on the firmest footing in Constantinople: the best attested and most intensively imperial, aristocratic, and Christian urban environment of the fifth- and sixth-century Mediterranean. Here, palatine attendants, bureaucrats, and the wider senatorial aristocracy were expected to accompany the emperor to church on major festivals and attend certain religious observances within the imperial palace. Similar patterns appear under Nicene rulers in Burgundian and Frankish Gaul, with weekly public attendance at church under certain Merovingian dynasts. Expectations of churchgoing at the courts of Homoian kings are trickier to reconstruct. Attempts to ensure Christian consensus could underpin various hypotheses: Nicene officials ignoring the doctrinal implications of shared observances in the royal palace, let off the hook entirely, or turning up to 'render unto Caesar'. On the (admittedly limited) surviving evidence, provincial governors seem the most detached from the liturgical routine of local Christian communities. These outsiders had good reason to keep their distance as they sought successfully to navigate complex local politics for their short terms of office. It is important to reiterate that there is only one surviving report of a ruler anywhere in the Roman world actively requiring those who served him to attend a particular church on a specific occasion (as opposed to banning heretical churchgoing). Of course, many of these officials likely went to the episcopal church more often than this. Yet their presence there appears impressively conditional, even given the vagaries of church attendance in this period. The pastoral authority of the bishop was limited, at least until a mid-sixth century shift to episcopal oversight of more localised provincial officials. As Synesius of Cyrene, Nicetius of Trier, and the bishops of the Council of Lyon discovered, church sanctions were applied to imperial and royal officials at the pleasure of the ruler. Those who served the state exercised their own capacity to judge the

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bishop and could withdraw from his church if they found him personally disagreeable or theologically unsound. Officials had at their disposal alternative pastoral figures, doctrinal experts, and liturgical arrangements. In this context, the public episcopal church was just one of several spaces and contexts in which courtiers, bureaucrats, and governors could seek to cultivate a reputation for piety. Whether they went to the cathedral, received visiting clerics in the capital, or made their own trips to prominent monasteries, officials had multiple recurring opportunities to develop mutually beneficial relationships with holy people. The picture delineated in these chapters fits the image of a self-directed aristocratic Christianity that has emerged from the last generation of scholarship. If anything, the position of officials in these political centres exaggerated the familiar consequences of doctrinal engagement, household patronage, and aristocratic hauteur. Imperial and royal officials could attach themselves to the local episcopal church and its congregation, but they also had the opportunity to identify themselves with an alternative Christian institution, with its own theological premises, liturgical calendar, and corporate ethos. The fifth-century church historian Socrates famously claimed that the East Roman Emperor Theodosius II turned his palace into a monastery.[5] Part III showed how, throughout this period, the state could be a Christian community.

This book has sought to trace the forms of Christian thought and practice prevalent in late ancient political institutions. It has given the lie to a sense of state agents as straightforwardly 'secular' authority figures in late antiquity, or rather, it has recontextualised imperial and royal officials according to more appropriately late ancient Christian ideas of the 'secular'. Like other laypersons, 'worldly' political actors had their own place within the divine economy and were supposed to try their best to be good Christians. This does not mean that officials always considered the implications of Christian commitment or necessarily governed differently because they were Christians. Traditional ideas of ethical practice, invocations of *raison d'état*, and accusations of self-interest, corruption, and violence (amongst other forms of sharp practice) remained the basic coordinates of late ancient politics. But late and post-Roman political regimes and their representatives were also deeply invested in the maintenance of an image of legitimate (because divinely sanctioned) authority. Providential ideas of divine support, involvement in the definition of correct religion, participation in shared rituals, and the wider socialisation

[5] Soc. *HE* 7.22.

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of the bureaucratic cadre could inculcate a corporate sense of belonging to an imperial or royal Christianity. In this context, I would suggest it is worth rethinking the positioning of officials and the state within wider developments in the Christianisation of political life. The exercise of pastoral authority by bishops and ascetics has tended to be seen as an attempt to redefine the terms of urban and imperial governance to the benefit of churchmen. Yet that pastoral authority was essentially dependent on a sense within the state that its representatives had to maintain a distinctly Christian legitimacy and that its subjects would expect those who ruled them to be pious Christians. Even antagonistic depictions of essentially worldly political actors worked on the premise that these individuals could be shamed into moral compliance through public acts of confrontation.[6] Some of those who spurned these invitations appear as enthusiastic proponents, both of a particular line on correct religion and of a Christian approach to governance in general. In that sense, it may be profitable to interpret such confrontations as a result not so much of a clash between Christian demands and worldly politics but rather of differing views on the specific implications of the former for the latter. Likewise, studies of the transformation of rulership and political ceremonial have tended to assume that such developments and occasions were provoked by, or attempts to appeal to, the church and churchmen. This dynamic is particularly obvious in studies of the post-imperial West, where the political self-representation of barbarian regimes is divvied up between 'Roman' strategies of legitimation – designed to reassure provincial elites – and 'Christian' ones – tailored for the bishops of these new kingdoms. It is equally apparent in Justinianic Constantinople, where officials are generally positioned as a force countervailing the emperor's 'liturgification' of his office.[7] Yet whether they were advisers in the palace and consistory, the drafters of pronouncements, or simply participants in ceremonial occasions, officials were deeply embedded in the regimes personified by the emperor or king. The foregoing analysis suggests that Christian officials need to be understood as the potential audiences for, and proponents of, such developments in the ideology of rule.[8] Their position in shaping and reinforcing the thinking of the Christian political 'establishment' in late antiquity deserves further study.

[6] E.g. Greg. Tur. *VP* 17.1–2 with Uhalde (1999).
[7] 'Liturgification': see Meier (2003); and esp. the response by Booth (2018).
[8] For important steps in this direction, see O'Brien (2022); (2026).

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This book has sought to trace different sorts of political 'norms' across late antiquity. As a result, it has not (primarily) been an account of the agency of individual officials. This reduction of specific texts, events, and interactions to reflections of the normal can (of course) flatten the possibility of the individual and the exceptional. In this regard, it is notable that late ancient writers often portrayed pious Christians as exceptions to the rule within the state, whatever their view on the status of the Roman Empire within an economy of divine providence. Contemporary texts also document individual officials who undertook unusual forms of Christian agency, whether they adopted the rigours of an ascetic life, disbursed their fortunes through church patronage, or became direct participants in doctrinal controversy. These patterns of exceptional Christian commitment within the state were not simply the invention of pious loners; they spread through networks, contacts, and communities within and beyond political institutions.[9] The social reproduction of official piety – and the transmission of ideas about what constituted it – warrants further treatment than I have been able to provide here. At the same time, I would contend that the foregoing discussions of 'norms' are justified, both in terms of wider expectations and more recondite aspirations. Panegyrical prose tended to lead authors to portray an addressee as exceptional while reinscribing conventional or communal expectations. Such rhetorical demands were at play even when ascetic theorists puffed up their official dedicatees. Moreover, texts about individuals were often intended for wider audiences and later preserved as general rules for such people and situations.[10] By aggregating analogous situations across the Roman world over these centuries, this book has identified common ideas, themes, and patterns across texts and contexts that tend to be treated separately. I hope that future work will pin down more precisely how particular officials, authors, and political environments differed from the norms sketched here.

Last of all, this book could have been, but has not been, a straightforward account of change over time. Part I showed the evolution of legal requirements regarding the religious identities and affiliations of officials.

[9] For literary portrayals of such influence, see esp. Aug. *Conf.* 8.15; *V. Petr. Iber.* 24–32; John Eph. *V. SS Or.* 57.

[10] General rules: e.g. Aug. *Ep.* 189.8 ('mirror'); Ferr. *Ad Reg.*. Later preservation: e.g. Sev. *Ep. Sel.* 11 ('That a man who can help or assist the right confession while in state affairs must not become a monk'), ed. Brooks, 1.2, 516; trans. Brooks, 2.2: 459; Behlmer (1998), 351 on headings in MSS of Shenoute and the *typikon* of the White Monastery: note e.g. 'if governors (*hegemon*) or urban magistrates (*archon*) have come to us . . .' ; and see Frohne (1985), 199–208, 231–53 on the reuse of Isidore's letters as general political advice by Agapetus.

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Parts II and III could have tried to sketch a similarly diachronic picture of the significance of Christian ideas of political service and normative patterns of churchgoing. Attention to specific issues has identified granular changes and possible conjunctures. Most notably, early sixth-century shifts in expectations of churchgoing and the audience for Christian official legitimation in the Eastern Roman Empire run alongside pre-emptive imperial demands for orthodox Christian appointees. As ever with the Christianisation of the Roman world, it is tempting to default to a linear narrative of increasing expectations. There is something to be said for this, insofar as Christian beliefs, attitudes, and practices likely kept pace with wider changes in imperial and royal representation, the cultural values of the aristocracy, and the role of the church in urban society. A more geographically limited and chronologically structured account could interrogate the correspondence between these developments in specific places and at certain times. The wider scope of this book has precluded such an investigation, given the danger of reverting to a discredited model of the 'rising tide' of Christianisation. Reducing complex discursive changes to a narrative also runs the risk of simply reproducing the uneven shape of the evidence, while placing too firm an emphasis on those periods that are best attested: not least, the reigns of Theodosius I, Theodosius II, and Justinian. Above all, it can work to close off the alternative possibilities that are evident across this whole period. Officials could be presented as decisively Christian authority figures in the middle decades of the fourth century and the guardians of a definitively classicising science of government in the late sixth. The necessity of religious uniformity could be asserted by the regimes of Diocletian, Constantine, or Julian and the need to waive such demands articulated under Justin II. Any straightforward narrative of a rise of official Christianity is disrupted, above all, by the emergence of new problems of religious diversity across the fifth and sixth centuries: the ongoing development of the Christological disputes of the Greek East, and the re-introduction of Homoians and even 'pagans' within the political communities of the post-imperial West. Recognition of these plural religious allegiances resulted in a return to something much closer to a fourth-century situation regarding church attendance and demands for orthodoxy in much of the Roman world. Late ancient expectations of Christian officials represented a series of recurring dialectics: between uniformity and diversity, the Christian and the classical, and the organised church and alternative forms of religious observance. These tensions would continue in the Byzantine East and the early medieval West. Rather like recurring calls for 'reform' of the medieval church, the contours and fault

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lines of official Christianity shifted with changes in the political landscape of the early middle ages.[11] These same tensions can be traced through the militarisation of post-Roman and Byzantine societies, the renegotiation of the 'public' and the 'private', and the establishment of bishops and abbots as public functionaries and royal officials.[12] 'Secular' officials in the early medieval West and middle Byzantium seem simultaneously to have been subject to much more and much less definitively Christian expectations of their government. In navigating how to perform *ministerium* and *douleia*, they were not confronting a new issue, thrown up by the extraordinary integration of church and state in Carolingian or Byzantine imperial formations.[13] Already in late antiquity, the authority of imperial and royal officials could be seen as part of the Christian God's ordering of the world. This book has sought to capture what that meant.

[11] On reform: see esp. Leyser (2016); for the Carolingian era: Westwell, Rembold, and Van Rhijn (2023).
[12] See esp. the classic Wormald (2006).
[13] Carolingian royal service as *ministerium*: see esp. Stone (2011). Byzantine imperial service as *douleia*: Magdalino (2009), 222; Lenski (2021), 457. Integration of church and state: esp. De Jong (2009) on Carolingian Empire; Dagron (2003) on Byzantine Empire.

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