Constantine and Consensus

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The church historian Socrates Scholasticus tells a story about an encounter during the Council of Nicaea between the emperor Constantine and the schismatic bishop Acesius. On learning that Acesius's dispute had nothing to do with the Creed or the date of Easter—the two major issues under debate at that Council—Constantine asked, "For what reason then do you separate yourself from communion with the rest of the Church?" Acesius replied that his sect objected to the relative leniency with which other Christians had treated those who had cracked under the empire-wide persecutions of the third century. He then "referred to the rigidness of that austere canon which declares, that it is not right that persons who after baptism have committed a sin, which the sacred Scriptures denominate 'a sin unto death' be considered worthy of participation in the sacraments." Whereupon, Socrates continues, the emperor said to him, "Place a ladder, Acesius, and climb alone into heaven."[1]

Although it appears in no contemporary source, there is every reason to believe that Socrates's story, recorded a century after the Council, is accurate. Socrates was a careful scholar, and he claims to have heard it from an elderly man who as a youth had accompanied Acesius to the Council, and who "simply stated what had taken place in the course of a narrative about the Council" (*hōs historēsas ta kata tēn sunodon elegen*). This last comment is revealing, for it suggests that Socrates knew that Constantine had already become a model of a sort—the exemplary Christian emperor, the subject of stories told more for their hortatory than their historical value. It was, therefore, significant to Socrates that his source was telling the story simply as a story, and not to make a point. Even more revealing is the way Constantine behaves in this story. The model Constantine was a pious son of the church who very predictably bowed to bishops and quaked before saints. But this Constantine is a self-confident ruler with a clear sense of what kind of Christian did and did not belong in his program. Acesius did not belong.

The author wishes to thank Naphtali Lewis and Jeffrey Burton Russell for their many helpful suggestions.

1. *Historia Ecclesiastica* [*HE*] 10, tr. A. Zenos in P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd ser. (New York, 1890) 2:17, with slight emendation. Acesius's scriptural reference is to John 5:15.

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https://doi.org/10.2307/3168653 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Socrates's story provides an opportunity to reconsider Constantine's goals with regard to the Christian church. Much has been written about this topic, too much of it governed by questions framed in an atmosphere of religious polemic. One gauntlet was thrown down more than a century and a half ago when Jacob Burckhardt characterized Constantine in *The Age of Constantine the Great* as an "essentially unreligious" statesman who grasped the strength of Christian organization and turned it to his own political ends: "Attempts have often been made to penetrate into the religious consciousness of Constantine and to construct a hypothetical picture of changes in his religious convictions. Such efforts are futile. In a genius driven without surcease by ambition and lust for power there can be no question of Christianity and paganism, of conscious religiosity or irreligiosity; such a man is essentially unreligious, even if he pictures himself standing in the midst of a churchly community."[2]

Critical reaction against Burckhardt's anachronistic reading has been decisive, and his work continues to be cited as proof that modern political analysis cannot be applied to the age of Constantine. The judgment is misleading on two counts: first, because many of Burckhardt's assumptions have gone unchallenged despite rejection of his conclusion; second, because for all the talk of power and organization, his attack on the traditional account of Constantine's piety can in no realistic sense be called a political analysis. In using political motives to question the sincerity of Constantine's conversion, Burckhardt pursued a line of inquiry that is rooted in the Reformation, not in political methodology. "Political" is not merely a pejorative term, the antithesis of "spiritual." Politics is a dimension of every organized activity; study of its procedures, and the skill of the individuals who use them, has as much to offer to our understanding of organized religious experience as it does to any other realm of human activity. Although central to later debates about the purity of the church that he empowered, the sincerity of Constantine's faith has little if anything to do with a real political analysis. This article, then, is not an attempt to revive Burckhardt's argument. Rather, it is my aim briefly to indicate some hidden traps in his analysis that have tainted subsequent studies, and then to suggest a few of the ways in which a genuinely political approach might resolve many of the problems that continue to divide Constantine scholars.

Although every student new to late antiquity immediately learns the flaw in Burckhardt's refusal to recognize the sincerity of Constantine's religious motivation, rarely is similar consideration given to his grounds for that conclusion. Burckhardt found Constantine's sincerity questionable in part

2. Tr. Moses Hadas (New York, 1949; repr. Berkeley, 1983), p. 292. The first German edition appeared in 1853 as *Die Zeit Constantin's des Grossen*. The second edition (from which the English translation was made) was published in 1880.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3168653 Published online by Cambridge University Press

because of evidence that the emperor continued to tolerate and even to support traditional religion. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that Christian belief necessarily entails intolerance—one of the more questionable legacies of Enlightenment scholarship. In faulting his reasoning, Burckhardt's detractors did not question this premise. Instead, they merely turned the argument on its head, insisting that it is the sincerity of Constantine's compromises and acts favoring traditional religion that must be questioned, not the sincerity of his conversion. Saddled with a pagan Senate in Rome and a non-Christian colleague in the east, Constantine, according to this argument, made a virtue of necessity by tempering his zeal for his new faith and sharing largesse with traditional cults. But after defeating his eastern colleague Licinius in 324 and moving operations to his new eponymous capital, Constantine finally was able to implement the repressive measures that heretofore he had only been able to recommend.[3]

For Burckhardt's critics as much as for Burckhardt, being Christian meant being intent on suppressing variant belief. Few would deny that such coercion has been all too prevalent a part of Christian history. But is this the only option that would have been open to Constantine? To think so is to assume a uniformity in attitude that the record belies. Certainly there were Christians who yearned to pay back their pagan oppressors in kind, to coerce their opponents into submission—Christians who, in the well-known words of one scholar, lived "in a mood of resentment and vengeance," their voices "shrill with implacable hatred."[4] But just as there was a spectrum of theological positions in the Christian movement, so also was there a spectrum of opinion with regard to the proper relationship of Christianity to Rome. For every Donatus demanding to know "What has the emperor to do with the church?" there was a Eusebius or Lactantius trying to reconcile Christianity with Rome.[5] Given this spectrum, it begs a very large question to speak of

3. This was the position taken by Norman Baynes in his monumental Raleigh Lecture of 1929, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Chadwick (London, 1972), p. 19: "As the years passed, toleration of paganism gave place to active repression; the emperor felt that he was strong enough to advance to a frontal attack upon paganism. The important fact to realize, however, is that this alteration in policy entailed no change of spirit, only a change of method. What Constantine would have recommended in 323 he later felt free to proclaim as the imperial will." In *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, tr. H. Mattingly (Oxford, 1948), A. Alföldi built on this position by dividing Constantine's policy into three stages to correspond roughly with his political situation.
4. A. Momigliano, "Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century A.D.," in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), p. 79.
5. On the variety of Christian attitudes toward Rome see Alan Wardman, *Religion and Statecraft Among the Romans* (London, 1982), p. 136. As the "Father of Church History," Eusebius of Caesarea decisively influenced the subsequent study of early Christianity by distinguishing a single orthodox tradition from heretical variations. See R. A. Markus, "Church History and Early Church Historians," in D. Baker, ed., *The Materials, Sources and Methods of Ecclesiastical History*, Studies in Church History 11

https://doi.org/10.2307/3168653 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Constantine's commitment to "the triumph of the church" without first asking "which Church?" and "what kind of triumph?"[6]

The significance of Socrates's anecdote of the encounter between Constantine and Acesius now becomes clear: it shows that Constantine did not convert to a church that would be limited to a small body of the pristine elect. The same conclusion may be drawn from his first recorded reaction to the Arian heresy, which is notorious for its indifference to the issues that generated half a century of turmoil throughout the empire. Writing to the chief adversaries, the presbyter Arius and Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, Constantine dismissed their dispute over the relationship of Father and Son as "intrinsically trifling and of little moment." His reason for finding so little value in a matter of such great theological significance was his recognition of the need to accomodate diversity. "For we are not all of us like-minded on every subject," he wrote, "nor is there such a thing as one disposition and judgment common to all alike." Accordingly, he then put foward his own criteria: "As far, then, as regards the Divine Providence, let there be one faith, and one understanding among you, one united judgment in reference to God. But as to your subtle disputations of questions of little or no significance, though you may be unable to harmonize in sentiment, such differences should be consigned to the secret custody of your own minds and thoughts."[7] This emphasis on diversity and a broad, vaguely defined standard of orthodoxy indicates very clearly the type of organization Constantine envisioned. He thought of Christianity as an "umbrella" organization, able to hold a number of different wings or factions together under a "big tent" of overarching mutual interest. The chief distinguishing element of such an organization is sufficient ambiguity and flexibility with regard to the basic

(Cambridge, 1975), pp. 1–17. On the importance of local traditions in early Christianity, see W. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen, 1964); Eng. tr. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971). On the Christian tradition that true belief could not be coerced, see P. Garnsey, "Religious Toleration in Classical Antiquity," in W. J. Shiels, ed., *Persecution and Toleration*, Studies in Church History 21 (Oxford, 1984), pp. 1–27. E. Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles: Dating the Divine Institutes," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 33–52, offers a fresh appreciation of this tradition on Constantine. For Donatus's question, asked in reply to an offer of subsidies from Constantine's son Constans, see Optatus, ed. C. Ziwsa, CSEL 26 (Vienna, 1893), 3.3: "qui cum ad Donatum, patrem tuum [frater Parmeniane], venirent [Paulus et Macarius] et, quare venerant, indicarent. ille solito furore succensus in haec uerba prorupit: 'quid est imperatori cum ecclesia?' et de fonte leuitatis suae multa maledicta effudit. . . ."

6. The phrase is Norman Baynes's: "the emperor's consistent aim was the triumph of Christianity and the union of the Roman state with the Christian Church." See *Constantine the Great*, n. 57.
7. *De Vita constantini* [*VC*] 2.61, rev. tr. by E. C. Richardson in Schaff and Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd. ser. 1:517–518.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3168653 Published online by Cambridge University Press

criteria for membership as to prevent the movement from splintering into small, isolated, and competing groups.[8]

Effective leadership of such an organization requires skill at finding common ground—building consensus and smoothing over differences. These, and not theological standards, are the criteria by which Constantine's methods and goals need to be interpreted. There is abundant evidence that Constantine appreciated this need. Socrates uses the incident with Acesius as an example of how much Constantine "desired peace" and "ecclesiastical harmony." Constantine's contemporary biographer, Eusebius of Caesarea, tells us that whenever given a choice among the various types of Christians, the emperor always sided with those who favored consensus.[9] He preferred, in other words, pragmatists over ideologues. It is possible to be even more specific about the type of harmony he sought, for Constantine's reaction to the pious mouthings of Acesius is consistent with the position he took during a string of clashes with Donatist rigorists, unyielding Arian theologians, and purist Nicene fathers. In all of these situations, Constantine favored not only peace and harmony, but also inclusiveness and flexibility.

Such a conclusion is not likely to generate much argument, Constantine's commitment to unity in the church being one policy on which virtually all parties agree. Conflict arises when the topic shifts to treatment of non-Christians: how far did Constantine's concern for harmony and consensus extend? Here is where apparent inconsistencies—continued use of pagan symbols and endowment of traditional priesthoods on the one hand, confiscation of temple treasures and refusal to participate in sacrificial rites on the other—have led to the most widespread disagreement. His biographer, Eusebius of Caesarea, claims that Constantine ordered the temples closed, but the specific examples that he gives are easy to explain as police actions, and Eusebius's statement of a more general ban therefore is usually taken as a bit of rhetorical exaggeration.[10] Another claim is more problematic. In his

8. A standard study remains that of David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1971); see esp. ch. 6: "Internal Politics: The Problem of Cohesion."
9. "However many he saw responsive to a superior sentiment and endowed with a sound and like-minded character he received eagerly, showing that he himself rejoiced in the mutual agreement of all. But those who stayed unyielding he turned away from." *VC* 1.44. Eusebius may be speaking specifically of the Council of Arles in this passage, but the statement holds true for every period of Constantine's career. For instance, Eusebius's summary of Constantine's remarks to the bishops following the Council of Nicaea at *VC* 3.21, has the emperor exhorting them "above all else to honor mutual harmony" (*pantōn peri pollou timōmenōn tēn symphōnon harmonian*). A decade later, Eusebius says at *VC* 4.41, Constantine urged the bishops at the Council of Tyre "to conduct themselves with concord and harmony" (*sun homonoia kai sumphōnia tē pasē ekhesthai*).
10. The chapter heading for *VC* 3.54 proclaims "The destruction of idol temples and images everywhere" (*Eidōleiōn kai xoanōn pantakhou katalusis*), but the text of the chapter only describes the collection of temple treasures. Immediately subsequent chapters

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Life of Constantine, Eusebius says Constantine ordered the traditional rites of animal sacrifice suppressed. It is clear that Constantine personally abhorred animal sacrifice, and that he removed the requirement from the duties of imperial officials. But indications of a more sweeping ban can only be teased out of tenuous readings and marginal comments, which then must be reconciled with abundant evidence for the continued performance of sacrifice on a fairly wide scale. Is this another case of exaggeration? If so, a law of Constantine's sons in 341 abolishing "the madness of sacrifices" demands explanation, because in it the emperors refer to their father's previous ban.[11]

But more than specific actions, it is Constantine's proclamations and public utterances that account for differing interpretations of his policy toward non-Christians. As early as 313, in the document commonly known as the "Edict of Milan," Constantine expresses a desire to allow freedom of worship to all inhabitants of the empire. After seizing the eastern half of the empire from his co-emperor (and the Edict's co-author) Licinius, Constantine restated this principle in the "Edict to the Provincials," where he extolls "the advantages of peace and quiet" for "those who delight in error alike with those who believe," and exhorted his subjects to "Let no one disturb another, let each man hold fast to that which his soul wishes, and make full use of this."[12] Such statements at one time led to characterizations of his age as one of toleration and religious liberty, and even a suggestion that his aim was not to insure the success of Christianity at all, but rather to create a new,

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name three temples that were destroyed—two of Aphrodite (at Aphaca, 3.55, and Heliopolis, 3.58) and the Asclepius temple at Aegai (3.56), to which may be added a third Aphrodite temple on the site of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (3.26) and pagan idols at the oak of Mambre (3.52). H. Dorries, *Constantine and Religious Liberty*, tr. Roland Bainton (New Haven, 1960), p. 45, found only the Asclepius temple could not be explained by non-religious reasons. More recently, Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians: Religion and the Religious Life from the Second to the Fourth Century* A.D. (New York, 1986), p. 671, suggests it was due to association with the pagan holy man Apollonius of Tyana, who had been held up as a rival to Christ during the Great Persecution.

11. *Codex Theodosianus* 16.10.2. In "The Constantinian Reformation," *The Crake Lectures, 1984* (Sackville, Can., 1986), p. 50, T. D. Barnes has made a general ban on sacrifice "the lynch-pin of the thesis that Constantine carried through a religious Reformation." He finds support for such a ban in Constantine's failure specifically to refer to sacrifices in an edict "To the Provincials" permitting continued use of the temples (*VC* 2.23–42): "Constantine's Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice," *American Journal of Philology* 105 (1984): 70. More recently, S. Bradbury has cited the orator Libanius's reference in his *Autobiography* (*Or.* 1.27) to a man who continued to perform sacrifice "despite the law which banned it" as evidence that such a ban existed (to be so, the remark must be read as a specific reference to the year in question—339 or 340—rather than as a general assessment of the man's character, in which case it refers to a year when the ban, if it existed, is generally conceded to have become a dead letter): "Constantine and the Problem of Anti-Pagan Legislation in the Fourth Century," *Classical Philology* 89 (1994): 129.

12. See *VC* 2.48–60 for the letter, and for this passage *VC* 2.56.1: "mēdeis ton heteron parenokhleitō; hekastos hoper hē psukhē bouletai katekhetō, toutō katakekhrēsthō."

https://doi.org/10.2307/3168653 Published online by Cambridge University Press

syncretist faith of Christians and monotheistic pagans.[13] But these interpretations have rightly been criticized for failing to take into account the bitterness with which Constantine assails pagan "temples of falsehood" in the latter document, which also includes denunciations of idolatry and superstition lacking in the earlier one. Such language, combined with the evidence of a general ban on sacrifice, supports the argument that Constantine's tolerance was minimal and grudging.[14]

One recent effort interprets the general ban on sacrifice as a "moral proclamation" that "placated certain pressure groups" but had "no practical effect on society."[15] The reminder that even late Roman emperors did not have the luxury of indulging their own preferences without concern for the wishes of constituencies is a salutary one. I will argue here that this concern proves that Constantine's goal was to create a neutral public space in which Christians and pagans could both function, and that he was far more successful in creating a stable coalition of both Christians and non-Christians in support of this program of "peaceful co-existence" than has generally been recognized. If correct, this argument would mean that Constantine's preference for Christians who chose peace and unity over doctrinal rigor and theological clarity extended beyond the confines of the church itself, and that he would not have favored coercion as a means of promoting Christian belief.

Constantine stakes out precisely this goal in his letter to Arius and Alexander. Although the bulk of this letter deals with the immediate problem of the Arian dispute, its introductory sentences lay out a more general program:

> I make that god my witness who is the helpmate of my endeavors and savior of all, that there were two reasons for those duties which I undertook to perform. The first was to unite the inclination of all peoples regarding divine matters into a single sustaining habit; second, I was eager to restore and rejoin the body of our common empire which had been stricken as if with a terrible wound. The former I planned to provide for through the hidden eye of the mind; the latter I attempted to correct by the power of military arms, knowing that if I were to establish through my prayers a common agreement among all the servants of god, the conduct of public affairs would enjoy a change concurrent with the pious sentiments of all.[16]

13. H. Dorries, *Constantine and Religious Liberty*. The argument for syncretism is made most persuasively by L. Salvatorelli, "La politica religiosa e la religiosità di Costantino," *Richerche Religiose* 4 (1928): 289–328.
14. T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), p. 210.
15. Bradbury, "Anti-Pagan Legislation," pp. 137–138.
16. *VC* 2.65 (ed. Winkelmann): "Prōton men gar tēn hapantōn tōn ethnōn peri to theion prothesin eis mian hexeōs sustasin henōsai, deuteron de to tēs koinēs oikoumenēs sōma kathaper khalepō tini traumati peponēkos anaktēsasthai kai synarmosai prouthumēthēn. ha dē proskopōn heteron men aporrētō tēs dianoias ophthalmō sunelogizomēn, heteron de tē tēs stratiōtikēs kheiros exousia katorthoun epeirōmēn, eidōs hōs ei koinēn hapasi tois tou theou therapousin ep' eukhais tais emais homonoian katastēsaimi, kai hē tōn dēmosiōn pragmatōn khreia sundromon tais hapantōn eusebesi gnōmais tēn metabolēn karpōsetai."

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By the "duties which I undertook to perform" Constantine undoubtedly meant the recently concluded campaign against his former colleague, the eastern emperor Licinius, whose removal had accomplished the second of his two purposes. There remained his foremost goal, religious unity. Does he refer here just to Christian unity? The remainder of the letter could lead one to think so. In the next sentence, Constantine writes of the Donatist schism and his hope that the Christians of the east might help him repair it, then urges Arius and Alexander to resolve their differences for the good of the greater Christian body. But the phrase "of all peoples" (*hapantōn tōn ethnōn*) in the opening passage indicates a more diverse community. For an empire expressly based on divine support, as Rome had been at least since Diocletian established the Jovian dynasty, the lack of a consensus on religious matters was no small thing. Achieving it was undoubtedly at least one goal of Diocletian's Great Persecution, and his failure to do so had if anything made the problem even more urgent. The unspoken link between this introductory statement and the rest of the letter, then, was Constantine's anticipation of a united Christian church to help him achieve this broader goal.

Do these words then mean that Constantine meant to "unite the inclination of all peoples regarding divine matters into a single sustaining habit" by making everyone in the empire Christian? The maddeningly elliptical style of late imperial prose makes it impossible to rule out such a possibility, though the passage as a whole more likely suggests that the search for a common denominator was still in progress than that one had been found and only awaited implementation. In any case, more germane to the problem at hand is Constantine's intention to use "the hidden eye of the mind" (*tous tēs dianoias parapempontas ophthalmous*) to accomplish this goal. This phrase, which probably refers to spiritual exhortation or prayer, does not spell out an exact program, but it is clear that Constantine considers this method to be different from the use of military force.[17]

This passage from Constantine's letter thus carries the same message as the "Edict to the Provincials," issued during the same period, in which Constantine argued that "it is one thing to undertake the contest for immortality voluntarily, another to compel it with punishment."[18] Another document now thought also to date from this period contains a similar message. This is an oration of Constantine, intriguingly entitled "To the Assembly of the Saints" that comes down as an appendix to Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of*

17. At *VC* 4.19, Eusebius records that Constantine ordered a Sunday prayer for non-Christians in the army in which they were to seek God with "their mind's eyes" (*tous tēs dianoias . . . ophthalmous*), and in his speech "On the Holy Sepulchre," 16.8, Eusebius calls on his hearers to "open the eyes of your mind" (*dianoixon tēs sautou dianoias tous ophthalmous*) to consider God's power.
18. "Allo gar esti ton huper athanasias athlon hekousiōs epanaireisthai, allo to meta timōrias epanagkazein" (*VC* 2.60.1–2). See also at n. 13 above.

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Constantine. The oration is a clumsy document—Eusebius says it is a Greek translation of a Latin original—and for the better part of a century it was held at arm's length by most scholars. Textual problems now appear soluble, however, and the oration finally is receiving serious attention as a source for Constantine's thought and policy.[19] At one point in this speech, Constantine speaks in favor of diversity, despite the fact that it works to the detriment of "confirming the faith in each individual" (*pros to bebaiousthai tēn kath' hekastou pistin*). Constantine ridicules those who criticize God for allowing human beings to be of different character. Such critics, he tells his audience, might just as well complain about the difference between day and night or land and sea; "wanting all men to be the same character" (*to de tous anthrōpous pantas homoiotropous einai*) is as laughable as "not realizing that the order of the universe is not identical with this world, nor physics consubstantial with ethics, nor the experiences of the flesh the same as those of the spirit."[20] There is even an echo of the attitude Constantine shows in Socrates's story of his encounter with Acesius. He mocks "those who stir hatred against the differences in our natures, who want all mankind to be one and the same worth," and he chides those who resent that "the human race" has "a share in the divine goodness." Constantine's target in this passage appears to be atheists and materialists—near its end, he mocks "those who are vexed by the distinction of beings, who want all things to have one and the same value," and chides those who resent that "the human race is not excluded from the divine goodness."[21] But it is not difficult to see how the same reasoning could lead to reject a rigorist like Acesius as well.

Taken together, these documents indicate that Constantine's religious policy was not limited to creating consensus within the church, but also aimed to include the church in a broader coalition built around the same criteria that he proposed in his letter to Arius and Alexander: agreement in public on the existence of a "Divine Providence"—no doubt the same Divine Providence that Constantine elsewhere described as his own helpmate and

19. Eusebius promises at *VC* 4.32 to append a speech Constantine gave "To the Assembly of the Saints" to his account of the emperor's life. In the manuscripts, a speech entitled *Oratio Constantini ad Coetum Sanctorum* (*Basileōs Kōnstantinou logos hon egrapse tō tōn hagiōn sullogō*) follows Book 4, preceding Eusebius's own *Tricennial Oration* to Constantine, which he also promises to append (at *VC* 4.46). In some manuscripts, Constantine's Oration is labelled as Book 5 of the *VC*. I cite it in the following notes as *OC* (*Oratio Constantini*), using the text of Ivar A. Heikel, ed., *Eusebius Werke* (Leipzig, 1902) 1:154–192. On the troubled history of this oration, see David Ison, "The Constantinian Oration to the Saints—Authorship and Background," (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1985).

20. *OC* 13.1 (Heikel, 1:171–172).

21. *OC* 13.1 (Heikel, 1:173.5–11): "asebes de kai to enthumēma tōn pros tēn diaphoran tōn ontōn apekhthanomenōn, mian te kai tēn autēn axian pantōn khrēmatōn einai thelontōn. . . . kai tēs theias agathotētos ouk amoiron to tōn anthrōpōon genos. . ." I am grateful to Robert Renehan for his advice on this passage.

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source of his right to rule—generally defined, with more specific attributes or definition confined to private assemblies. This is not to say that he aimed to create a syncretistic religion that merged Christianity with other beliefs, that he did not himself distinguish between Christianity and other forms of monotheism, or that he did not personally desire and work for the conversion of the largest possible number to Christian truth. It is a statement about policy, not belief.

Was such a policy feasible, or even conceivable, if Constantine had been truly converted? According to the traditional view, no. In this view, although there were points of contact and overlap between Christian and pagan monotheism, the distinctions between the two were clear, and irreconcilable. Such connections, according to this view, could only have served as a bridge, facilitating movement over a chasm that was narrow but exceedingly deep. What is emerging from more recent scholarship, however, is a sense that even a century later the division between Christian and pagan—at least on the level of educated lay individuals—was far less distinct than it has been portrayed.[22] Such findings make a broadly inclusive program such as posited here more practical than it once seemed.

The conventional view of a "life and death struggle" also requires us to see pagans as uniformly hostile to Christianity, even though Christian sources themselves tell us of pagans who were revolted by the excesses of the Great Persecution, and who provided shelter to Christian neighbors.[23] Indeed, it

22. In a review of a collection of essays on the relationship of Neoplatonism to Christianity, Felice Lifshitz points out "how very much we have been oversimplifying by looking only through neat little spectacles, spectacles with one lens called 'Hellenistic Philosophies' and another called 'Christianity.'" *Bryn Mawr Classics Review* 4 (September 1993): 22. Mark D. Smith, "Eusebius of Caesarea: Scholar and Apologist. A Study of His Religious Terminology and Its Application to the Emperor Constantine" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Santa Barbara, 1989), p. 121, reaches a similar conclusion through analysis of Eusebius's religious terminology. On common sentiments regarding monotheism in late antiquity, see G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth. Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, (Princeton, 1993). A case in point is that of Synesius of Cyrene—a Christian bishop whose philosophical leanings still lead scholars to describe him as a late and incomplete convert to Christianity. As Frances Young has observed, "To state whether one thinks Synesius was really a Christian or not, says more about one's own understanding of Christianity than about Synesius himself." See Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background* (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 177. See also A. Cameron and J. Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley, 1992); M. Salzman, *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1990); and D. Hunt, "Christianising the Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Code," in J. Harries and I. Wood, eds., *The Theodosian Code: Studies in the Imperial Law of Late Antiquity* (London, 1993), pp. 143–158.

23. On the general lack of enthusiasm for the persecution, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey* (Norman, Okla., 1964), 1:73. Eusebius wrote that with the apparent end to persecution after Galerius's edict in 311, "even they who had formerly thirsted for our blood, when they saw the unexpected wonder, congratulated us on what had taken place." *HE* 9.1.11. In the *Divine Institutes* (5.13.11), Lactantius claimed that many pagans abandoned worship of their gods in

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may well be that Constantine's success in creating the coalition is due in no small part to the fact that the turmoil, and ultimate failure, of the Great Persecution had thoroughly discredited the cause of those extremists on the pagan side who appear to have lobbied for, and perhaps even engineered, such a policy. In the aftermath of such a catastrophe, a commitment to renounce coercion and rebuild public life around a religiously neutral framework that could include Christians as well as pagans not only made good sense, it also made good politics. As in so many other ways in the late empire, the army was the model. On Sundays, Eusebius tells us, Constantine sent his Christian soldiers to church, while requiring all others to recite a monotheistic prayer in which they acknowledged a generic "God of All" (*ton d' epi pantōn . . . theon*) as the author of victory and preserver of the Constantinian house.[24]

The program entailed risks. It meant alienating not only rigorists like Acesius, but also those Christian militants who did live up to modern expectations and "thirst for revenge." Constantine had already reined in this latter group by making clear in the Edict to the Provincials that he would not permit attacks on pagan temples.[25] But Constantine had the politician's gift of knowing how to court those whom he opposed.[26] The "Oration to the Saints" shows how he mollified militants.

Scholars have looked at the Oration primarily for what it can tell us about Constantine's own views. Read in this way, as a pure expression of Constantine's personal thought framed without regard to any external considerations, it amounts to a disappointing amalgam of muddled theology and pious platitudes, whose rambling point seems to be that Divine Providence rewards virtue and punishes vice. But in the context of public policy, even

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revulsion of the cruelties of the persecution, and elsewhere (5.11.13) conceded in a backhanded way that some officials did not enforce the death penalty so as to keep their "virtue" intact. Athanasius, *History of the Arians* 64, reported that pagans sheltered Christians even though they "frequently suffered the loss of their own substance, and had trial of imprisonment, solely that they might not betray the fugitives. They protected those who fled to them for refuge, as they would have done their own persons, and were determined to run all risks on their behalf." Tr. Newman , rev. and ed. A. Robertson in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2d ser., 4:293–294.

24. *VC* 4.18–20.

25. Constantine ends his edict with a clear distinction between persuasion and coercion: "For it is one thing to undertake the contest for immortality voluntarily, another to compel it with punishment." Immediately following this sentiment, he writes, "I have said these things and gone through them at greater length than my customary concern requires, since I did not wish my belief in the truth to be hidden, and *especially because I hear some people are saying the customs of the temples and the power of darkness have been taken away*." These final words, which I have emphasized, suggest that Constantine was writing either in response to, or to preempt, attacks against pagan temples, and for such an offense Christian zealots are the most reasonable suspects.

26. Eusebius puts it somewhat differently. At *VC* 4.4, he says that Constantine never let a litigant leave his presence empty-handed, awarding him something even if he lost his suit. But the skill is recognizable enough.

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platitudes can be revealing, especially when it is the emperor who speaks them. This is especially the case when the organization is an umbrella, because then the stock of common symbols and core texts from which these platitudes are drawn is likely to contain a number of ambiguous and even contradictory meanings that can be manipulated according to the speaker's purposes. Regarding coercion, for instance, it is possible to cite Jesus's injunctions to "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies" in order to advocate a policy of non-intervention, or to remind hearers of the need to resist Satan and use the example of Jesus driving out the moneylenders to justify a more aggressive program.[27] It is precisely such ambiguities that make the role of discourse so important in the Christian community, because adherents rely on these interpretive messages to explain how they must react to any given situation.

For this reason, it is less important to try to fix an exact date for the Oration, as scholars lately have tried to do, and more important to remember that Eusebius appended it to the *Life of Constantine* as an example of the type of speech that, he says, Constantine was accustomed to giving.[28] Its message is one that Constantine frequently repeated, suggesting that it should be read for signs of a more immediate, more political, conflict—over the control of the Christian message. Reading the oration in this way, not as an expression of personal belief but as the work of someone who was attempting to set the course of a large and diverse movement, is another means of ascertaining Constantine's goals and the means he chose to implement them.

In this context, the Oration has a two-fold relevance. First, it shows where Constantine placed himself among the variety of positions Christians took in defining themselves in relation to outsiders; second, it reveals an underrated skill for expressing his position in a way that was likely to gain the broadest possible approbation. As an example of both, Constantine at one point defines God as the Being "properly worshipped by the wisest and most sensible peoples and states," and in another ridicules those who complain that God did not make all humans of one character and one faith.[29] The former statement opens the door to a broader spectrum of beliefs than Christian rigorists likely would have accepted, while at the same time putting those who would refute it in the uncomfortable position of seeming to deny that the Christian position was the "wisest and most sensible." The latter, in

27. On the "contradictory element" in ideological movements see G. Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York, 1980), p. 23. Regarding the ambiguities in Christian core texts, see G. Stroumsa, "Early Christianity as Radical Religion," in *Israel Oriental Studies* 14 (1994): 173–193. I am grateful to the author for an opportunity to read an advance copy of this article.
28. *VC* 4.29, 32. Robin Lane Fox observes of the Oration: "if genuine, it is our longest surviving statement from an Emperor between Marcus's *Meditations* and Julian's letters." *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1986), p. 627.
29. *OC* 11.7, 13.1 (*pros to bebaiousthai tēn kath' hekastou pistin*, 171.32–33).

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attacking critics of God, served to isolate Christians like Acesius as readily as pagan unbelievers.

One passage from the Oration demonstrates how Constantine used core Christian texts both to provide moral cover for his policy of toleration and to discredit the case for coercion, while at the same time making the case for an umbrella Christianity that would cover much classical belief as well. Here he uses the moment of Jesus's arrest to remind his audience of the way Jesus rebuked the disciple who tried to defend him with the words "all they that take the sword shall perish by the sword." In Constantine's version, however, this "heavenly wisdom" is restated as a decision "to choose rather to endure than to inflict injury, and to be ready, should necessity so require, to suffer, but not to do, wrong"—words reminiscent as much of Plato's *Apology of Socrates* as of the Gospel.[30] In another passage he singles out as God's greatest attributes both his capacity to forgive the "foolish notions" of humankind and the firmness with which he refuses at any time to lessen "his innate benevolence." To do otherwise, Constantine says, is "witless and impious."[31] In the context of public policy, such comments amount to more than mere moral platitudes. They indicate a clear preference for a movement capable of being both tolerant and diversified. Constantine's argument in the Oration, combined with the minimal theological standard that he set in the letter to Arius and Alexander, indicates that he aligned himself with a type of Christianity whose self-definition would allow for a broad range of contrary and even conflicting views—precisely the type of group now defined by the title as an umbrella organization.

The martyr is in many ways the quintessential Christian symbol. As imitators of Christ's suffering, martyrs can symbolize the need to endure evil, to suffer for others, to pay back hatred with love. But because they would not yield to injustice at any cost, martyrs are also heroes of resistance, the front line in the war against Satan. Constantine's use of the martyrs in the Oration, therefore, is particularly instructive. Before an audience that was likely to include many who had lived through Diocletian's persecution, Constantine predictably showers the martyrs with praise. He speaks of "the fearlessness even before death that comes from pure faith and undiluted dedication to God," and in another line that may well have been inserted specifically for the applause it would provoke, he even praises the "faith that does not shrink before the powers of the royal chambers."[32] Such lines demonstrate Constantine's solidarity with Christian militants. But when it comes to drawing lessons from the example of the martyrs, Constantine has a different message. He points out that "the martyr's life is chaste and obedient," and claims

30. *OC* 15.4. The scriptural quotation is from Matt. 26:52.
31. *OC* 11.7.
32. *OC* 12.3, 20.2.

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that the significance of a martyr's death is that it "shows him full of magnanimity and gentility."[33] This was Constantine's constant message. Writing to the Catholic bishops of North Africa around the year 321 to tell them he will not use force against their Donatist opponents, he defuses any potential disappointment by arguing that "our faith ought to trust that whatever shall be suffered from the madness of men of this ilk will avail before God for the grace of martyrdom. For what else in this world is it to conquer in God's name than to endure with steadfast heart the rude onslaughts of persons who harass the people of the law of peace?"[34]

With such language, Constantine turns the martyrs from symbols of resistance into exemplars of endurance and fortitude. He did even more. By appropriating the powerful symbol of the martyrs and turning it to his own purposes, Constantine managed at one and the same time to play to the militants and to turn their own rhetoric against them. The importance of such "internal propaganda" for molding and unifying group opinion cannot be overestimated.[35] By stressing the irenic side of the Christian message, Constantine was able to create moral cover for moderates who shared his view of an umbrella faith, and at the same time create a rhetorical environment in which Christians who favored coercive measures looked like extremists.

Situating Constantine as the leader of a large and potentially volatile movement resolves the discrepancies between fierce language and relatively mild action that have led to such differing depictions of Constantine's character and intentions. This behavior pattern is not limited to his actions regarding pagans; it extends to his treatment of Jews, and even dissident Christians.[36] The answer lies not in theology, but in the nature of Christianity

33. *OC* 12.4: "eiper ho te bios sōphrōn tou marturos kai tōn panaggelmatōn mnēmōn, hē te teleutē plērēs heurisketai megalopsukhas te kai eugeneias."
34. ". . .maxime cum debeat fides nostra confidere quicquid ab huiusmodi hominum furore patietur martyrii gratia apud deum esse valiturum. Quid est enim aliud in hoc saeculo in nomine dei uincere quam inconditos hominum impetus quietae legis populum lacessentes constanti pectore sustinere?" *Le dossier du Donatisme*, vol. 1: *Des origenes à la mort de Constance II (303–361)*, ed. J.-L. Maier (Berlin, 1987), p. 242, 2.37–45.
35. Truman, *Governmental Process*, pp. 195–196.
36. On Constantine and the Jews, two recent works reach diametrically opposite conclusions. In "Eusebius as a Polemical Interpreter of Scripture," in H. Attridge and G. Hata, eds., *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Detroit, 1992), p. 594, Michael Hollerich chides scholars for underestimating "the hostile language with which his [Constantine's] legislation refers to the Jews, who are styled as 'a deadly, nefarious sect.'" Conversely, Garth Fowden, looking at Constantine's actions, concludes that he was "relatively tolerant" of Jews: *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), p. 87. A similar observation might be made about Constantine's oft-cited complaint against the Donatists in his letter to the bishops at Arles in 314: "They demand my judgment, but I myself await Christ's judgment!" (*Meum iudicium postulant, qui ipse iudicium Christi exspecto!*) Maier, ed., *Le Dossier*, p. 169, 2:69–70. Despite this outburst, Constantine in fact proceeded to hear their appeal. J. H. W. G.

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as a mass movement with a militant wing. Constantine kept the loyalty of this wing by throwing them rhetorical tidbits, while at the same time exploiting the irenic side of the Gospel message to lead the movement onto the broader ground of a faith that would be tolerant, broadly based, and inclusive. In modern parlance, he seized control of the discourse, using the ambiguities in the Christian message to isolate Christians who advocated coercive measures, making them appear to be at variance from the faith's core teachings, and thereby vulnerable to a charge of extremism. Doing so, he neutralized the potential liability that his policies entailed. Even the most hardline rigorist would have difficulty opposing a policy that seemed to flow directly from Jesus's own teaching.

The Oration thus opens a new door to understanding the great transformation that took place during the age of Constantine and its aftermath. The key to the Constantinian period is an emperor who was Christian, but who resisted pressure from any quarter to use coercion to enforce belief. His aim was to restore the coexistence that prevailed for half a century prior to the Great Persecution, and the success he enjoyed is perhaps the greatest casualty of the traditional paradigm of pagan-Christian "conflict," which has so conditioned us to hear only the voices of extremists that the endurance of this coalition for most of the fourth century goes largely unnoticed. The traditional model is unsatisfactory not just because it takes Christian coercion for granted, but also because in doing so it completely misinterprets the changes that took place under Constantine, obscuring that age's most important development. That development, I would argue, was the creation of a consensus in favor of a broadly inclusive monotheism under which both Christians and most pagans could live in harmony.[37] Hindsight lets us speak of a Constantinian "Revolution" or "Reformation," but it would be truer to the age to speak of a Constantinian "consensus" as that emperor's principal goal and contribution.

Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford, 1979), p. 298, refers to such conditions as "a paradox" and "evidence of internal conflict."

37. In his classic study of modern revolutions, Crane Brinton observed that moderates dominate in early stages of a revolution, extremists in the crisis stage. *The Anatomy of Revolution*, rev. ed. (New York, 1965), p. 95. In this sense, the Age of Constantine might still be said to conform to a revolutionary pattern.

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