SJT 55(3): 356–362 (2002) Printed in the United Kingdom © 2002 Scottish Journal of Theology Ltd

Article review

Hal Drake's *Constantine and the Bishops*[1]

Constantinianism in context

The subtitle of Drake's book, 'The Politics of Intolerance', provides an apt starting place. First, 'Politics': it is Drake's contention that many earlier scholars' investigations of Constantine have run amok by adopting largely theological perspectives, by worrying whether Constantine was 'sincere' in his Christian profession. Indeed, much in Constantine's practices and discourse (such as we can recover them) suggested to previous commentators that he had little understanding of theological niceties, and that his Christian commitment was to some degree feigned. Drake argues that we should rather look to the political problems that Constantine faced and the policy options available to him. (For one, Diocletian's persecution had proved a massive and costly failure: where to go from there?) If 'politics' is the arena in which we assess Constantine, scholars should investigate social processes, not theological puzzles. We have been using the wrong map: 'political symptoms' should not be treated with 'theological remedies' (465). Public policy studies, in particular, is the field to which we should turn.

Training this lens on Constantine, the first Christian emperor emerges not as a somewhat dense theological hack, but as an astute diplomat – and in diplomacy circles, unlike theological ones, 'intentional vagueness' can often be a 'key to success' (197). Monotheism itself, Drake hints, probably provided an analogue for the political arrangements Constantine hoped to enforce in his earthly realm: whereas polytheism might offer an 'unsettling paradigm for political strife in the lower spheres' (297), monotheism suggested an uncontested power 'on top'. Although Drake considers the issue of Constantine's conversion – the vision, the labarum – it is not Constantine's psyche that is under consideration, but the political effects of his conversion: with it, Constantine acquired a new constituency, Christians, and most especially bishops. Constantine appeared to rest his hopes in this latter constituency, yet it was 'the bishops' who ultimately undid his agenda. Drake's Constantine is a master forger of consensus politics, and Drake argues throughout that Constantine endorsed a 'consensus monotheism' that he hoped would prevail by its appeal to the many who were

[1] Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, 640 pp., $75.00.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930602000364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

weary of religious persecution and civil unrest. Of what that consensus consisted, and how it finally failed, is the major topic of the book. In Drake's view, Constantine tried to form a consensus by promoting an 'inclusivist public religion' (466), an 'umbrella organization' centering on a 'vague monotheism' (347) that would be acceptable both to philosophically minded pagans and to Christians: all could, without offense to conscience, call upon the *summa divinitas*, especially if reference to 'Christ' was discreetly omitted. Constantine's religious vision necessitated 'tolerance' within quite wide parameters; for its establishment, belief would not be forced and coercion not applied. Monotheism (a religious stance) need not lead to coercion (a political category), Drake argues. (Drake concedes that Constantine's willingness to use coercion against heretics does run counter to his ideals of tolerance – but it also bought him support from bishops: he could 'look tough' to 'militant Christians at very little cost' [349].)

Still, there is no reason why, hypothetically, Constantine's broad religious program should not have worked, Drake argues: after all, one of Christianity's founding messages advocated love and 'turn the other cheek'. Moreover, Christian apologists of the second and early third centuries – a group to whom Drake repeatedly returns – had showed how many points of pagan philosophy and teaching resonate with Christianity. Once the public cult of blood sacrifice had been rendered unnecessary and prayer could take the place of blood sacrifice, Christians could feel comfortable joining with pagans of a certain stripe in affirming a benevolent monotheism. To be sure, 'hard right' pagans would not find this compromise satisfactory, but Drake implies that they did not constitute the decisive view of the pagan intelligentsia by this time.

This hoped-for consensus was never fully realized and certainly did not prevail by the later fourth century. Here, we turn to a second word in Drake's subtitle, 'Intolerance'. As Drake observes, although 'love' was one message of biblical Christianity, there was a second message, 'resist Satan' – and by the late fourth century, the latter came to prevail. From the political vantage point, Constantine lost control of his agenda. Constantine had thought that he could count on bishops as his allies in forming a new religious consensus, but, in effect, this decision had unintended consequences: by giving so much power to bishops, they, not he, came to control 'the fine print', and their vision of Christianity was not Constantine's. Rather than a broad-based religion of tolerance, the bishops drew sharp boundaries between Christian and pagan; they reduced the gray area to a thin line that sharply differentiated good from evil.

In some respects, Drake argues, Christian emperorship was similar to, or different from, pagan emperorship. Under both pagan and Christian

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emperors, the empire was viewed as a sacral institution. As heads of a religious institution, emperors from Augustus onward took pains to represent themselves as acquiring their legitimacy from, and attributing their successes to, divine agency. Indeed, at the time when Constantine came to power, no conceptual category existed by which religion and politics could be separated. And legitimacy was something that Constantine desperately needed: after all, he was a usurper-of-sorts. Likewise, just as Constantine's pagan predecessors had tried to work through the Senate, or, more specifically, to play the Senate off against the army, so Constantine needed a base analogous to the Senate in which, like Augustus, he could consider himself 'first among equals'. This Constantine found in the bishops. But here enters the dissimilarity, on which Constantine's vision would founder: bishops were independent operators. Unlike the pagan elites who simultaneously held high 'secular' office and high priesthoods, bishops depended on a different power base, their local communities – and it soon became evident how power-hungry bishops such as Athanasius could deploy monks and the urban mobs as a 'virtual paramilitary force' (397). Moreover, bishops held their tenure for life, and thus many of them had long years in which to work out their own designs, unlike governors and other imperial officials, who moved in and out of office rapidly. To be sure, bishops were happy to accept the largesse that Constantine as superlative patron dished out – but they were not indebted to him in the way that clients traditionally had been expected to pay their debts to patrons. Drake illustrates the changed relation of bishops to the emperor by contrasting the acquiescence of Theodosius I to Ambrose toward the end of the century with Athanasius's earlier appeal to Constantine: when the latter 'tried to don the mantle of the holy man', Drake wittily notes, 'all it got him was an excursion to Gaul' (469).

Constantine's agenda also had a pronounced social edge (although how much of this was connected with his religious belief was not entirely clear to me): in Drake's reading of Constantine, he stood as champion of the common people, and endeavored to relieve the oppression of the court system that favored wealthy elites over the poor, widows, minors, and orphans. Angered by bureaucrats who milked their positions to aggrandize themselves, Constantine tackled the court system as a moral, not an economic, problem. Here, Constantine thought he could effect reform by granting unprecedented power to the alternative courts presided over by bishops, giving them the power of unilateral decision-making; here, Drake quotes a number of Constantinian edicts and rests his case especially on the First Sirmondian Constitution. That this aspect of Constantine's program found less support from the bishops than we might have expected is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930602000364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

signaled by the fact that Eusebius, soon after Constantine's death, dropped this aspect of Constantine's agenda from his representation of the emperor's life. To be sure, when Eusebius gave speeches at which Constantine was present, such as the oration 'In Praise of Constantine', he hoed more to Constantine's own line, but as soon as Constantine was safely dead, Eusebius began the process of creating a 'central, unified, monolithic orthodoxy' (362), effectively wiping out the middle ground that Christians might share with philosophically minded pagans. Moreover, Drake argues, from Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* one might mistakenly conclude that dealing with bishops was the most important item on Constantine's agenda. It is not, as Walter Burkhardt so famously put it, that Eusebius was 'the first thoroughly dishonest historian', but that the agendas of Eusebius, and other bishops, differed from that of Constantine and promoted their own independent power. And the coercion that Constantine had somewhat reluctantly used against recalcitrant heretics now swelled by the end of the fourth century to a flood of coercive measures against pagans as well as other Christians, and found its theological justification in Augustine's views on the unfortunate necessity of coercion. Thus Constantine proved unable to convey his *auctoritas* to his successors; the bishops had run off with his agenda so as to enhance their own power at the expense of imperial clout. A few other points should be mentioned as important to Drake's argument. First, the flood of new converts who embraced Christianity once it became fashionable proved to constitute a 'destabilizing' force with which Constantine had to cope – and destabilized societies tend to foster an insecurity and fearfulness that promote intolerance. In a sense, the rapid growth of Christianity – ironically, its 'success' – contributed to the exclusivist, intolerant, and finally coercive form of the religion that had developed by the late fourth century.

A second factor that looms large in Drake's account is Julian the Apostate. Despite his brief reign, Julian's attempt to restore pagan cult, especially to reinstate blood sacrifice, unleashed Christian fears that a new era of persecution might be on the way: would Julian be a new Diocletian? And what did Julian's attempt to 're-paganize' education portend? Julian, then, helped to eradicate the middle ground that Constantine had protected, and thus inadvertently promoted the narrower, more exclusivist form of Christianity that came to dominate the following decades.

I turn now to my own comments and questions. I consider Drake's book a stimulating addition to studies of 'the invention of tradition', a topic that historians, anthropologists, and scholars of literature have found so intriguing of late. Rather than the Constantine who comes down to us in the 'received tradition', Drake presents us with a 'kinder, gentler' Constan-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930602000364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tine, a mix of Robin Hood, Ralph Nader, and Walter Rauschenbusch, with a dash of a benevolent Machiavelli thrown in for good measure. That said, I turn to the following questions:

1. Although Drake warns us against casting doubts on Constantine's 'sincerity' and other emotional/psychological states, he places much emphasis on Constantine's 'intentions'. Drake writes frequently of 'unintended consequences', a phrase that in itself presupposes a knowledge of Constantine's 'intentions'. I am interested to learn how such 'intentions' can be deciphered: are they not just as inscrutable as the workings of Constantine's heart, which led earlier commentators to ponder the emperor's 'sincerity'? Or can we pry out his 'intentions' from the 'effects' of his pronouncements?

2. Drake places much emphasis on pagan monotheism, a topic that has received considerable attention of late. Although a few writings of philosophically inclined pagan thinkers of the fourth century are here summoned to represent a pagan constituency that might have been willing to join in Constantine's consensus, they seem like a rather small group on which to rest a case. In the volume of essays edited by Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1999), most of the essayists detail these more philosophical forms of paganism; the essay by Stephen Mitchell, however, on the cult of Theos Hypsistos (with an impressive list of 293 inscriptions pertaining to the cult) appears to provide a more popular base for 'pagan monotheism'. Does Professor Drake think that a cult of this sort is an attractive option for consideration? Moreover, by concentrating largely on philosophers, is not paganism transformed from 'cultic practice' to a 'system of belief', with cognitive elements replacing practice? And if we now have pagan 'belief' rather than the earlier state of paganism which appeared tolerant because there was 'nothing to compel' (453), would not the move to a religious system based on 'belief' suggest that intolerance and its political analogue, compulsion, might have followed? – just as Drake thinks some Christians feared in Julian's policies. And – another suggestion – why could Constantine not root his consensus politics in a shared educational system, rather than in monotheism? Since pagans and Christians of a certain class were educated together and in the same way, here might be an arena in which those of diverse religious practice could be joined. Or does the educational program of late antiquity pertain too exclusively to elites to provide a suitable base? (I think I would argue that it might provide a wider base for consensus than does the philosophical form of monotheism that Drake suggests.)

3. I suspect that Drake overrates Julian's importance to this discussion, although I certainly acknowledge that Julian is one of the more intriguing

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and engaging figures of the fourth century. Yet I see very little evidence in later fourth- and early fifth-century Christian literature that Christians were beset with anxiety about his pro-pagan campaigns – and there is precious little Christian literature from the mid-360s that might give us a clue as to Christians' worries over Julian's policies in the immediate aftermath of his reforms and death. Although Ephrem the Syrian, presumably writing at the time of Julian, perhaps thought he had cause to worry about the emperor's policies, it is notable that the works written about Julian by later Christians (e.g. Cyril of Alexandria) were composed considerably after the time when Julian was a threat, and seem more like literary exercises through which the authors tried to whip up inner-Christian enthusiasm. As far as Christian worries about Julian's decrees regarding the pagan educational system are concerned, what else was there? We hear of some furtive attempts to translate Christian literature (if it can be called that) into classical forms, but no lasting effects resulted from this curious campaign. Christians continued to be educated in the pagan classics for many decades to come.

4. If Drake sees the persecution of inner-Christian heresy as the key to the bishops' bid for power, I suggest that the persecution of Priscillian and his followers could provide Drake with an interesting (and alarming) case for reflection on the intersection of politics, emperors, and bishops' power.

5. I would also be interested in hearing Drake's response to the question raised by Paula Fredriksen in her review of his book in the *New Republic* (18 June 2001): where are the Jews in this discussion? Do they play no role?

6. Last and most intriguing to me are the political metaphors through which Drake argues his case. I have not compiled a complete list, but I mention the following words and phrases: players (the major image), insider politics, blue-ribbon panels, paper constituencies, spin doctors, putsches, conflict resolution, neutralizing extremists, controlling agendas, gaining leverage – for starters. On the one hand, the effect of this language makes the politics of the early fourth century resonate with that of America from the Cold War era to our own day. Indeed, conflicts between Senate and army, for example, seem all too familiar to us. Likewise, politicians then as now need constituencies and strive to wrest power from their opponents.

Nonetheless, I had at first imagined that the public policy model here evoked might rest on some theoretical foundation. Here, a comparison with another recent book is in order, Clifford Ando's *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (University of California Press, 2000). Ando, whom I gather is in conversation with Drake, bases his view of consensus politics in the early to middle Roman empire on an approach to political theory derived in part from Jürgen Habermas, centering on notions of

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citizen's consent and free speech in the democracies of western Europe and America. I am uncertain, however, whether this theoretical underpinning fits ancient imperialism. I would like to ask Professor Drake if he thinks the public policy model which informs his book can be divorced from the assumptions of modern democratic policies and practices. Can the language of public policy studies be appropriated without the entailment of a certain stripe of political theory, one that emerges so clearly in Ando's book?

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930602000364 Published online by Cambridge University Press