

Policy and Belief in Constantine's "Oration to the Saints"*

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The potential value of the Oration "To the Assembly of the Saints" as a guide to the policy and belief of the Emperor to whom it is attributed, Constantine the Great, has long been recognized. Norman Baynes saw it half a century ago, even while denying the authenticity of the work.¹ More recent authors have been less reluctant to concede Constantinian authorship, and consequently more willing to exploit clues to the emperor's intentions, as well as to his whereabouts, embedded in this lengthy exhortation to Christian virtue.² Given the renewed interest, the time seems ripe for using the Oration to address a conceptual problem that I suspect lies at the bottom of most of the remaining dispute over the religious career of the first Christian emperor. The problem lies in the two words used above: "policy" and "belief". Are they to be read as synonymous, as most scholars who have written on the Constantinian question appear to have assumed? Or should they be read, and studied, as two separate and, at least potentially, contradictory aspects of the emperor's program?

Constantinian scholars often write in a way to suggest that they assume the two terms are synonymous; hence, they take it for granted that Constantine's commitment to Christianity necessarily entailed a commitment to advance the fortunes of the Christian church at whatever cost to that body of established customs and practices that we now call paganism. Consequently, when I suggest that Constantine followed a religious policy that did not conform to

* I would like to thank my colleague Robert Renehan for his aid with the text of the "Oration to the Saints", abbreviated in the following notes as *OC* (for *Oratio Constantini*). Citations are to the text by Ivar A. Heikel, *Eusebius' Werke*, I (Leipzig, 1902). For the *vita Constantini* (*VC*), I have used the text by F. Winkelmann (Berlin, 1975).

¹ "Constantine the Great and the Christian Church", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 15 (1931), pp. 341-442. See the 2nd ed. by H. Chadwick (London, 1972), p. 56. For a careful study of the Oration, concluding in favor of Constantinian authorship, see now David John Ison, *The Constantinian Oration to the Saints - Authorship and Background* (PhD Diss., King's College, London, 1985).

² T.D. Barnes refers to it as "the main ... evidence for Constantine's intellectual attainments and for his interest in philosophy and theology", in "The Conversion of Constantine", *Echoes du Monde Classique/Classical Views*, ser 4, 29 (1985), 372; cf. his discussion in *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), 73ff.; Robin Lane Fox concludes in *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1987), p. 627, that it "settles for ever the question of the Emperor's commitment when he embarked on the rule of a unified Christian Empire in 324".

this aggressive Christian program, I appear to these same scholars to be questioning Constantine's commitment to Christianity.³

The Oration, in particular a lengthy passage in which Constantine discusses the nature of God, allows us to take a conscious and separate look at these two components of Constantine's commitment. The point is made especially clear when the Oration is read together with another document with which it may be roughly contemporary, the encyclical Letter to the Eastern Provincials that Constantine circulated subsequent to his defeat of Licinius in 324.⁴ So doing will reveal not only a way to resolve apparently contradictory statements they contain, but also that there were divisions in 4th century Christianity over more than just the nature of the Godhead.

The apparent contradictions in these documents consist of the juxtaposition of ferociously anti-pagan language with pleas for peace, unity, and toleration. Thus at one point in the Oration, the emperor attacks "base and shameless Blasphemy" for deceiving the young and simple, and for jeopardizing their souls through the worship of false idols:

But you, base and shameless Blasphemy, exalted by false oracles and word of mouth, you deceive the young and prevail over adolescents and those adults who have the nature of adolescents, leading them away from worship of the real God and substituting the imitations of idols, to whom they may pray and do obeisance, so that the wages of their failure to perceive await those who have been deluded.⁵

In the immediately following section, Constantine addresses certain "impious ones" – presumably pagans – making clear that he considers their rites and sacrifices nothing more than excuses for licentious behavior:

So begone, impious ones, (for it is permitted to you that your sins go unpunished) to the butchery of your sacrifices, your feasts and great festivals, simulating worship but pursuing pleasure and licentiousness, and pretending to conduct holy rites but serving your own pleasures. You have no knowledge of the Good nor of the first commandment of the great God, who first organized the human race and then ordained his Son to supervise its existence, so that those who have lived rightly and

³ See, e.g., Averil Cameron, "Eusebius of Caesarea and the Rethinking of History", in E. Gabba (ed.), *Tria Corda: Scritti in onore di Arnaldo Momigliano* (Biblioteca di Athenaeum I; Como, 1983), 79ff.

⁴ Both documents are preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea in the *vita Constantini*. See *VC* II.48-60 for the letter; the Oration follows Book IV as an appendix, as promised at *VC* 4.32. The passages I cite are from ch. 11, which is virtually a separate discourse, with its own introduction and conclusion. In it, Constantine deals with the difficulties we humans face as we try to rise out of vice and error. On the question of date, see n. 18 below.

⁵ *OC* XI.6: σὺ δ', ὃ πονηρὰ καὶ ἐπονείδιστε βλασφημία, ψεύδεσιν ἐπαιρομένη φήμαις τε καὶ διαβολήσεσιν ἐξαπατᾶς μὲν νέους, πείθεις δὲ μεράκια καὶ τῶν ἀνδρῶν τοὺς μερακιώδη τινὰ τρόπον ἔχοντας, ἀπάγουσα μὲν αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς θρησκείας τοῦ ὄντως θεοῦ, συνιστάνουσα δ' ἀγαμάτων πλάσματα, οἷς εἴχοντο καὶ προσκυνοῖεν, ὥστε ἐξαπατηθέντας μένειν τὰ ἐπίχειρα τῆς αὐτῶν ἀναισθησίας.

wisely in the judgment of the Son may partake of a second life both blessed and truly happy.⁶

Such comments accord well with the position taken by some scholars that Constantine's conversion to Christianity entailed a frontal assault against traditional pagan practices, in particular sacrifice.⁷ Yet in another passage, Constantine calls these same "impious men" fools for not realizing that "fierceness" (ὀμότης) never prevails over benevolence (φιλανθρωπία), or that reason and magnanimity are the true signs of a great spirit and innate strength:

Certain witless and impious men, to be sure, say our Christ was legally condemned and that he who is the cause of life for all living things was deprived of his own life. It is not surprising that those who have committed themselves to impiety and show neither fear nor shame for their own depravity... [Here there is a lacuna in the text]. But that they appear to have persuaded themselves that God, who is incorruptible, was overpowered by man, or that fierceness became master of benevolence, this transcends all foolishness. They do not realize that the great spirited and forbearing one is never deterred by insolence, nor is one with the greatest innate strength moved by shameful treatment, but never becomes... breaking down the wildness of those who go against it with the confidence of reason and magnanimity.⁸

These traits, reason and magnanimity, he then calls "the holy victory, the true power and the greatest act, a fitting lesson for the entire populace".⁹

Ferocious language, juxtaposed against praise of reason and restraint. The combination is similar in the "Letter to the Provincials", where in direct

⁶ OC XI.7: ἄπιτε δὴ, δυσσεβεῖς, (ἐφέϊται γὰρ ὑμῖν διὰ τὴν ἀτιμώρητον ἁμαρτίαν) ἐπὶ τὰς τῶν ἱερῶν σφαγὰς θοίνας τε καὶ ἑορτὰς καὶ μέθας, προσποιούμενοι μὲν θρησκείαν ἐπιτηδεύοντες δὲ ἡδονὰς καὶ ἀκολασίας, καὶ θυσίας μὲν ἐπιτελεῖν σκηπτόμενοι ταῖς δ' ἑαυτῶν ἡδοναῖς δουλεύοντες. οὐ γὰρ ἴστε ἀγαθὸν οὐδὲν οὐδὲ τὸ πρῶτον τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ πρόσταγμα, διατάσσοντός τε τῷ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένει καὶ ἐπισκῆπτοντος τῷ παιδί τὸν τούτων διακυβερνᾶν βίον, ὅπως οἱ δεξιῶς καὶ σωφρόνως βιώσαντες κατὰ τὴν τοῦ παιδὸς κρίσιν δεύτερον βίον μακάριόν τε καὶ εὐδαιμόνα λαγχάνωσιν.

⁷ Most vigorously by T.D. Barnes, in several works. In *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 275, Barnes points particularly to this chapter of the Oration as evidence that the emperor "believed sincerely that God had given him a special mission to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity". In "The Constantinian Reformation", *The Crake Lectures, 1984* (Sackville, New Brunswick, 1986), p. 50, he refers to a law prohibiting sacrifice, attributed by Eusebius to Constantine, as "the lynch-pin of the thesis that Constantine carried through a religious Reformation".

⁸ OC XI.4: φασὶ δὴ τινες ἀνόητοι καὶ δυσσεβεῖς ἄνθρωποι, δικαιωθῆναι τὸν Χριστὸν ἡμῶν καὶ τὸν παραίτιον τοῦ βίου τοῖς ζώσιν αὐτὸν τοῦ ζῆν ἐστερηθῆναι... τοὺς ἀσεβεῖν ἀπαξ τολμήσαντας καὶ μῆτε δεδιέναι μῆτε ἐγκαλύπτεσθαι τὴν ἑαυτῶν πονηρίαν οὐδὲν θαυμαστόν, ἐκεῖνο δὲ πᾶσαν ὑπερβέβηκεν εὐήθειαν τὸ δοκεῖν πεπεικέναι ἑαυτοὺς ὑπ' ἀνθρώπου θεὸν ἄφθαρτον βεβιάσθαι, ἢ τὴν ὀμότητα ἐπικρατῆ γεγενῆσθαι τῆς φιλανθρωπίας, μὴδ' ἐννοεῖν ὅτι τὸ μεγαλόψυχον καὶ ἀνεξίκακον οὐθ' ὑπὸ ὕβρεως διατρέπεται, οὐθ' ὑπὸ προπηλακισμοῦ τῆς φυσικῆς στερρότητος ἐξίσταται, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ ... γίγνεται τῶν ἐπεμβαινόντων τὴν ἀγριότητα λογισμοῦ τε καὶ μεγαλοψυχίας φρονήματι θραύουσα.

⁹ OC XI.6: αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ σεμνὴ νίκη, τὸδ' ἀληθὲς κράτος, τὸ(δε) μέγιστον ἔργον καὶ ἀρμόζων τῶν συμπάντων δῆμων σωφρονισμός.

address to God Constantine characterizes pagan worship as “temples of falsehood”, contrasting these with the true virtue of Christian worship:

Men of sound judgment must be persuaded that those alone will live in a holy and upright fashion who you yourself call to depend on your holy laws. All those who wish to keep themselves away have their temples of falsehood; we have the more splendid house of your truth, the very one which you have dedicated naturally.¹⁰

The surliness of the passage suggests a hostility to pagan worship that seems to confirm a revolutionary attitude. Yet this same passage also clearly concedes these “temples of falsehood” to their worshippers, and immediately preceding it Constantine extols “the advantages of peace and quiet” for “those who delight in error alike with those who believe”.¹¹ “Let no one disturb another”, he urges, “let each man hold fast to that which his soul wishes, and make full use of this”.¹² So it is throughout. At one point he writes, “Let us all, accordingly, partake of this proffered benefit, that is, the beauty of peace, consciously avoiding all confrontation”,¹³ and at another, “What each man has adopted as his persuasion, let him do no harm with this to another”, adding, “For it is one thing to undertake the contest for immortality voluntarily, another to compel it with punishment”.¹⁴

What are we to make of these Jekyll-and-Hyde statements? If belief and policy must be synonymous, and if the statements of belief betray an aggressively anti-pagan stance, then these exhortations to mildness and toleration cannot be taken at face value. They must be attributed to political weakness, rather than genuine belief – tactical feints, rather than strategic goals. In this vein, we would find less significance in the concession to pagans than in the angry manner in which it is made; less in the express mention of “temples” than in the absence of the word “sacrifices”.¹⁵

¹⁰ VC II.56.2: τοὺς δ' εὖ φρονούντας πεπεισθαι χρῆ, ὡς οὗτοι μόνοι ἀγίως καὶ καθαρῶς βιώσονται, οὓς αὐτὸς καλεῖς ἐπαναπαύεσθαι τοῖς σοῖς ἀγίοις νόμοις. οἱ δ' ἑαυτοὺς ἀφέλκοντες ἐχόντων βουλόμενοι τὰ τῆς φρονολογίας τεμένη· ἡμεῖς ἔχομεν τὸν φαιδρότατον τῆς σῆς ἀληθείας οἶκον, ὄνπερ κατὰ φύσιν δέδοκας.

¹¹ VC II.56.1: Εἰρηνεύειν σου τὸν λαὸν καὶ ἀστασίαστον μένειν ἐπιθυμῶ ὑπὲρ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῆς οἰκουμένης καὶ τοῦ πάντων ἀνθρώπων χρησίμου. ὁμοίαν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν οἱ πλανώμενοι χαίροντες λαμβανέτωσαν εἰρήνης τε καὶ ἡσυχίας ἀπόλαυσιν.

¹² VC II.56.1: μηδεὶς τὸν ἕτερον παρενοχλεῖτω· ἕκαστος ὅπερ ἡ ψυχὴ βούλεται κατεχέτω, τούτῳ κατακεχρήσθω.

¹³ VC II.59.1: χρησώμεθα τοίνυν ἅπαντες ἄνθρωποι τῇ τοῦ δοθέντος ἀγαθοῦ συγκληρία, τουτέστι τῷ τῆς εἰρήνης καλῷ, χωρίζοντες δηλαδὴ τὴν συνειδησὶν ἀπὸ παντὸς ἐναντίου.

¹⁴ VC 60.1: πλὴν ἕκαστος ὅπερ πείσας ἑαυτὸν ἀναδέδεκται, τούτῳ τὸν ἕτερον μὴ καταβλαπτεῖτω· ... ἄλλο γάρ ἐστι τὸν ὑπὲρ ἀθανασίας ἄθλον ἐκουσίως ἐπαναιρεῖσθαι, ἄλλο τὸ μετὰ τιμωρίας ἐπαναγκάζειν.

¹⁵ So Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 210: “To be sure, it permits pagans to retain ownership of their temples and forbids the use of violence to compel them to become Christians. But Constantine uses harsh language throughout, continually denounces paganism (temples are ‘groves of falsehood’), and pointedly refrains from mentioning sacrifices”. And on p. 211, “Yet none of this entailed toleration for the forbidden cult practices.” Cf. idem, “Constantine’s

If, however, we allow policy and belief to be studied in separate categories, these contradictions disappear. Constantine remains a committed Christian, but now becomes one just as clearly committed, to the chagrin of his more militant brethren, to a policy of winning – not through intimidation, but by example; or, to use a less current modern allusion, to a policy of “peaceful co-existence”. From this perspective, the conclusion of the “Letter to the Provincials”, is significant:

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. I should, indeed, have advised this very thing to all men, if the violent opposition of wicked error were not immoderately embedded in some souls, to the detriment of our common salvation.¹⁶

This explicit denial of rumors that the “customs (τὰ ἔθη) of the temples” have been taken from them must be placed in the balance with the grudging way in which Constantine concedes the “temples of falsehood” to their users and his failure in that same phrase to be as comprehensive in his concession as a modern theorist might wish. For it indicates that Constantine was more committed to a policy of peace and unity than to one of Christian victory.

Which of these interpretations is correct? There are grounds for honest debate. My position forces me to discount, for instance, the final words of the Letter, referring to a “violent opposition” that stays his hand, since these can be taken to mean that Constantine was indeed bowing to political pressure (though even here I would call attention to his choice of verb: “advised”, not “compelled”).¹⁷ But the Oration, if for no other reason than the length of its exposition, points the way to an answer. It is not going to be as explicit an answer as we would like. Nowhere in the Oration does Constantine say in plain, simple language, “this is my policy”, or “this is what I am going to do”. But by applying some very simple principles of content analysis, a policy emerges just as clearly as if he had.

Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice”, *AJP* 105 (1984), 70: “its guarantee to the eastern provincials that they may retain possession of their ‘shrines of falsehood’ should be less important than its total silence about their right or ability to perform ritual acts of sacrifice in pagan temples” (replying to my criticisms in *AJP* 103 (1982), 462-66).

¹⁶ *VC* II.60.2: ταῦτα εἶπον, ταῦτα διεξῆλθον μακρότερον ἢ ὁ τῆς ἐμῆς ἐπιεικειᾶς ἀπαιτεῖ σκοπός, ἐπειδὴ τὴν τῆς ἀληθείας ἀποκρύψασθαι πίστιν οὐκ ἐβουλόμην, μάλισθ’ ὅτι τινὲς ὡς ἀκούω φασὶ τῶν ναῶν περιηρῆσθαι τὰ ἔθη καὶ τοῦ σκότους τὴν ἐξουσίαν· ὅπερ συνεβούλευσα ἂν πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις, εἰ μὴ τῆς μοχθηρᾶς πλάνης ἢ βίαιος ἐπανάστασις ἐπὶ βλάβῃ τῆς κοινῆς σωτηρίας ἀμέτρως ταῖς ἐνίων ψυχαῖς ἐμπεπήγει.

¹⁷ It appears to me more likely, however, that Constantine is not referring to political opposition in this sentence, but instead making the more philosophical point that variations in human nature make universal salvation impossible. In support of this reading, I would point to another part of the Oration, ch. 13, where Constantine ridicules those who fault God for not making all men of one character, so that it would be impossible to “choose the worse over the better.” On this passage, see also n. 26 below.

The first such principle is to ask what the purpose of the Oration was, in order to have some touchstone against which to measure individual statements it contains. To some extent, knowing the specific time and place of the Oration would help identify its purpose; but intense efforts to recover these data from internal hints have instead had the effect of leading scholars to assume a purpose on the basis of the date and place they determine, rather than allowing one to develop out of the text itself. A simple error, but one that Eusebius himself, with his infuriating indifference to the Oration's time and place, did not make.¹⁸

An 80-year-old joke has served to compound the error. In 1906, Edouard Schwartz took the Oration's opening salutation of the arrival of Easter as grounds to dub it a "Karfreitagspredigt"¹⁹, and this nickname of "Constantine's Good Friday Sermon" has caught on with scholars, no doubt because it is so much more comfortable than trying to decide what an "Assembly of the Saints" is. But by implying a purpose, the nickname precludes the need to discover one in the text, even though it has long been clear that the Oration is neither a sermon nor a celebration of Easter: it lacks the Scriptural text requisite for the one, and it does not develop the theme of Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection expected of the other. Indeed, after these opening remarks, the Oration never returns to the subject of Easter.²⁰ Clearly, the occasion provided a pretext, not a purpose.

What, then, is its purpose? Its explicit theme is not Easter but Providence, *πρόνοια*, a keyword in the Oration, one which occurs no fewer than 25 times, in every major section, and in both Introduction and Conclusion.²¹ But the care Constantine takes to associate Providence with himself – even to the extent of using an identical image of celebration in the heavens for both the blessings of the Savior and his own victories²² – suggests another, less

¹⁸ In his only mention of the Oration, at *VC* IV.32, Eusebius says that he has chosen it as typical of the type of speech the emperor always made (described at *VC* IV.29). In contrast, Barnes, placing it shortly before the war with Licinius, finds the speech "a political manifesto": *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 75; Lane Fox, opting for Antioch and 325, places it in the context of the growing debate over Arianism: *Pagans and Christians*, pp. 627ff. In "Suggestions of Date in Constantine's Oration to the Saints," *AJP* 106 (1985), 335-49, I tried to show grounds for both earlier and later dates as a way of recalling Eusebius' interest in it.

¹⁹ *RE* VI,1 (1907): 1427.

²⁰ As observed by G. Redke, "Die Deutung der 4. Ekloge Vergils durch Kaiser Konstantin", in R. Chevallier (ed.), *Présence de Virgile: Actes du Colloque des 9,11 & 23 Décembre, 1976* (Paris, 1978), p. 148, n. 5.

²¹ *πρόνοια* *OC* 1:2; 3:1,4; 5:2; 6:7,9; 7:2; 8:1,3; 9:5; 11:5,8,13,14,15; 13:1; 15:4 (twice); 17:4 (twice); 20:6; 25:4(twice),5; 26:2. Cf. in addition *προνοέω* at *OC* 6:3; 9:4; 15:4. Identification of the major sections of the Oration by various authors differs slightly. My own are Proemium, chs. 1-2; Part I, chs. 3-10; Part II, chs. 11-21.3; Part III, chs. 21.4-25; Peroration, ch. 26.

²² Cf. *OC* XX.10, commenting on the promise of the Fourth Eclogue – Κόσμου κητέοντος ὄρα, φησί, καὶ τῶν στοιχείων ἀπάντων χαράν – with XXV.5, regarding the peace he himself has brought: βοῶ μὲν ὁ κόσμος αὐτός, λαμπρότερα δὲ καὶ ἐναργεστέρα ἢ τῶν ἄστρων πομπὴ καταβαίνεται...

abstract, purpose. Emperors of this age used deity as a source of legitimacy, and none did so more consistently and effectively than Constantine himself. Since we know that the original audience of this Oration was significantly, if not exclusively, Christian,²³ it seems safe to conclude that giving proof of his claim to Christian leadership was at least one of Constantine's aims.

Why this need to demonstrate his credentials? A topic for another time is the difficulty of managing a movement like Christianity. Suffice it for now to say that the single name, "Christian", that we apply to all adherents to the faith suggests a monolithic uniformity belied by the multitude of fissures that we know existed. Modern scholarship has been preoccupied with but one of these cracks, the one which Nicaea attempted to patch. Another, equally large, divided those Christians who wanted to impose orthodox belief on their neighbors from others accustomed by the apologetic tradition to seek common ground and consent.

The existence of such a division must be posited: as B. Warmington has pointed out to me, we do not know the name of a single Christian militant during Constantine's reign. Yet it seems fairly safe to do so. An exultant mood following the failure of Diocletian's persecution has long been recognized, and sometimes even generalized into a "mood of resentment and vengeance" shared by all Christians.²⁴ The Letter to the Provincials provides further evidence, for its irenic language clearly was directed as much at Christians as pagans: when Constantine writes, "It is one thing to undertake the contest for immortality voluntarily, another to compel it with punishment",²⁵ he can only have had Christian zealots in mind.²⁶ Within a few years of Constantine's death, Firmicus Maternus was urging his heirs to close the temples, and such anti-pagan lobbying is well-documented for the remainder of the century.²⁷

Once the existence of this anti-pagan pressure group is recognized, the

²³ As indicated in ch. 1 of the Oration, where Constantine acknowledges the arrival of Good Friday and salutes his hearers as teachers and followers of divine teaching, and ch. 2, where he invokes both the Church and hearers "who worship God sincerely" (οἱ τὸν θεὸν εἰλικρινῶς σέβοντες).

²⁴ As by A. Momigliano, "Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century A.D.", in idem (ed.), *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), p. 79.

²⁵ *VC* 60.1: ἄλλο γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸν ὑπὲρ ἀθανασίας ἄθλον ἐκουσίως ἐπαναιρεῖσθαι, ἄλλο τὸ μετὰ τιμωρίας ἐπαναγκάζειν.

²⁶ A similar group may be the target of *OC* XIII, where Constantine ridicules those who criticize God for allowing men to be of different character, which works to the detriment of "maintaining the faith in each individual" (πρὸς τὸ βεβαιοῦσθαι τὴν καθ' ἑκάστου πίστιν, 171.32-3). Only preconceived notions make us assume this passage pertained to pagans rather than Christians.

²⁷ *De error prof. rel.* 20.7; it is usually assumed to have been written prior to Constantius' law ordering the temples closed, preserved as *CTh* 16.10.4. For increasing anti-paganism, see other laws under that title; see also R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984), ch. 10.

reason becomes evident not only for Constantine's need to prove his credentials but also for the split personality in these documents. In the internal Christian debates, Constantine's favor always went to those groups working for moderation and unity; the documents under review here show a similar sentiment regarding Christian-pagan relations. The selection from Chapter XI of the Oration already cited, where Constantine argues that God is not "deterred by insolence" and that his tools are "reason and magnanimity" is indicative.²⁸ Even more telling, however, is a subsequent comment. Immediately prior to his ill-tempered concession to the "impious ones" of their sacrifices and festivals,²⁹ Constantine praises Christ with a rhetorical question:

... is not this the God properly worshipped by the wisest and most sensible peoples and states, who possesses manifold power and who surpasses every superlative, whose praise is greater and miracle more astounding, in that he does not abuse his power to punish insolence, but forgives men their foolish notions, deeming folly and error inbred human traits, while he himself abides by his personal resolve and never at any time (οὐδοτιοῦν) lessens his innate benevolence?³⁰

Given the close identification Constantine always made between himself and his God, it is impossible to conclude other than that in describing Christ as one whose greatest attribute is that he does not use the power he possesses to punish error, he meant this description also to apply to himself. It amounts to a reply to those Christians urging him to more severe measures – one that shows us not only how to read his language in other documents, but also something of his skill at managing people.

For Constantine to deny the demands of these Christian militants outright would have jeopardized his claim to their leadership. His problem, then, was to keep their support while rejecting the course they advocated, and his solution was twofold: to placate them with fiery rhetoric while at the same time exhorting the Christian virtues of forbearance and love. By describing such a policy as Christ's, rather than as his own, Constantine was able not only to advocate a position certain to disappoint at least a segment of his hearers, but also to vindicate it. Had he himself disavowed sterner measures against idolators, he would have risked confrontation with believers who, as he notes at another point in the Oration, showed no fear of bearding the

²⁸ *OC* XI.4. See n. 8 above.

²⁹ See n. 6 above.

³⁰ *OC* XI.7: ἄρ' οὐκ ὑπὸ σωφρονεστάτων καὶ φρονιμοτάτων ἔθνων τε καὶ δήμων οὗτος ὁ θεὸς κατ' ἀξίαν σέβεται, παντοίας μὲν δυνάμεως ἐπειλημμένος πᾶσαν δ' ἀγαθότητα ὑπερ-κύπτων, ἐξ οὗ καὶ ὁ ἔπαινος μείζων καὶ τὸ θαῦμα ἐξαίσιον, ὅτι τῷ τῆς δυνάμεως μεγέθει πρὸς τὴν ἐκδικίαν τῆς ὕβρεως οὐκ ἀπεχρήσατο, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἡλίθια φρονούσι συνέγνω, ἴδιον ἀνθρώπων τὴν μαρίαν ἠγησάμενος καὶ τὸ ἐξαμαρτεῖν, αὐτὸς δ' ἐν τῇ οἰκείᾳ προαιρέσει μένων, οὐδοτιοῦν τῆς ἐμφύτου φιλανθρωπίας ἐμείωσεν.

imperial lion himself.³¹ In using Christ's own example instead, he spoke words to which his potential opposition had no choice but to assent.

This passage thus shows us how to read the verbal onslaughts in this and other documents. It was Constantine's particular brilliance to offer something even to those he rejected. Whenever he sat in judgment, Eusebius tells us, he saw to it that even those who lost a suit never left empty handed.³² So, too, in the case of these Christian militants: Constantine mollified them with stern, uncompromising language even while refusing to take the steps they wished. It was a ploy, not unknown to politicians of later ages, that allowed him to identify with the frustrations of his more radical followers while at the same time disavowing responsibility for his inaction.

By attention to these nuances of the "Oration to the Saints" we find a key not only to Constantine's policy but also his methods, and in so doing we begin to understand how, in dealing with so volatile a movement, this emperor succeeded in ways that eluded his successors.

³¹ *OC* XX.2 (H. 183.15-16): ἀληθῆ λέγων· ἡ γὰρ πίστις τῆς βασιλικῆς αὐλῆς τοῦς δυνάστας οὐ φοβηθήσεται (commenting on Vergil, *Ecl.* IV:20-21).

³² *VC* IV.4.