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THOMAS G. ELLIOTT

## Constantine's Early Religious Development

In a recent article entitled 'Constantine's Conversion: Do We Really Need It?' I argued that Constantine told Eusebius an impressive story of the miracle, as he saw it, by which God showed Constantine how to make the *labarum*, the banner under which he won his civil wars, and that it was only Eusebius who claimed that this miracle caused a conversion.<sup>1</sup> As may be imagined, I have been critical of earlier assumptions and arguments, and the effect of my argument, if it is accepted, will be to remove the subject of Constantine's conversion from history. The religious development of Constantine before he became an emperor is another matter. On this subject, which can now be treated properly, there is a small amount of interesting evidence, consisting of statements by Constantine himself, which is not to be ignored in order to preserve the credit of Eusebius. Eusebius is the primary source for the conversion of Constantine because he invented it. For the religion of Constantine before 311-12, as for the story of the sign in the sky,<sup>2</sup> Constantine is the primary source.

His statements about his religious development have been misconstrued or neglected for two reasons. First, they are not emphatic statements about the subject: in both cases they are made in passing, as Constantine gives his own religious experience as proof of a general point which he is making. Second, they do not support the theories of spectacular development or political opportunism which currently hold the field.<sup>3</sup> Neither of these facts excuses us from the task of hearing him out.

The first text is the beginning of Constantine's letter to the bishops after the Council of Arles in 314.<sup>4</sup> He had convoked the bishops in

1. The article is in *Phoenix*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1987, pp. 420-38. It does not refer (because of my ignorance) to J. Szidat, 'Konstantin 312 n.Chr.' in *Gymnasium*, Vol. 92, 1985, pp. 514-25. I regard Szidat's opinion (given on the basis of the old arguments) that Constantine was a Christian before 312 as support for my argument that Constantine had not been a pagan prior to 312.

2. Parts of Constantine's story were given accurately by Gelasius of Caesarea (in Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.3-7) and by Lactantius in *De mortibus persecutorum* 44. Eusebius' version is in *Vita Constantini* 1.28-32. Hereafter cited as *VC*.

3. I have accepted all of the Constantinian documents cited as genuine. Notes 9 and 32 below provide some of the reasons for this acceptance. Since I think that the documents yield a straight story I have not shared the need to argue forgery in order to dismiss evidence against my own preconceived notions. Cf. T. D. Barnes, 'Emperor and Bishops, A.D. 324-344: Some Problems' in *American Journal of Ancient History*, Vol. 3, 1978, p. 53.

4. Optatus, Appendix 5 = Soden, *Urkunde* 18, in Hans von Soden, *Urkunden zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Donatismus*, Bonn 1913.

order to have them deal with complaints from the Donatists. They had given their decision against the Donatists, who, much to his displeasure, had appealed against it to him. Before going on to deplore the behaviour of the Donatists, Constantine approved the bishops' decision, as follows:

The incomprehensible kindness of our God does not allow mankind to wander too long in the darkness, nor does it allow the odious wills of some persons so to prevail as not to grant men a new opportunity for conversion to the rule of righteousness by opening to them a saving path by means of its most glorious light. I have indeed learned of this through many examples, and can judge of the matter by my own case. For there were at first in me things which fell short of righteousness, and I did not think that the supernal power could see any of the things hidden in my heart. What fortune should this have brought upon me? — surely one overflowing with every evil. But Almighty God, who sits in the watchtower of heaven, has granted to me what I did not deserve. Truly, most holy bishops of the Saviour Christ, I can now neither describe nor number the gifts which of his heavenly benevolence he has granted to me, his servant. I rejoice therefore, dear brethren, I especially rejoice that you have now, after a completely fair adjudication, recalled to a better hope and fortune those whom the wickedness of the Devil seemed to have led by his wretched persuasion to depart from the glorious light of the Catholic law . . .<sup>5</sup>

The second (and last) text is the beginning of Constantine's speech of welcome to the bishops at Nicaea in 325.<sup>6</sup> The fullest version of the speech is that provided by Gelasius of Cyzicus in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 2.7, 1-42.<sup>7</sup> The source for this full version was the fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History* of Gelasius of Caesarea, who had written a continuation of the history of his predecessor Eusebius. This material could not be used with confidence until Friedhelm Winkelmann published his studies of the two Gelasii in the 1960s,<sup>8</sup> and it has not been properly used to date.<sup>9</sup> Some parts of the very beginning of the speech are incomprehensible, but I translate in order to lead into the part of the text bearing directly on the subject:

5. My translation.

6. Other versions of part of this speech are conveniently collected in F. R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State and Christian Church*, London 1966, Vol. 1, pp. 129-33.

7. In *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*, G. Loeschke and M. Heinemann (eds), vol. 28, Leipzig 1918.

8. Winkelmann's studies are: 'Untersuchungen zur Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisarea' in *Sitzungsberichte der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Klasse für Sprachen, Literatur und Kunst*, Nr. 3, 1965; 'Charakter und Bedeutung der Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisarea' in *Byzantinische Forschungen*, Vol. 1, 1966, pp. 346-85; 'Die Quellen der Historia Ecclesiastica des Gelasios von Cyzicus (ein Beitrag zur Rekonstruktion der Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Caesarea)' in *Byzantinostavica*, Vol. 27, 1966, pp. 104-30.

9. I suspect that the failure to use the material has been largely due to Winkelmann's view that Eusebius was always a better source for Constantine than was Gelasius. In my 'Constantine's Conversion' I argued (I hope satisfactorily) that the reverse was true with regard to their accounts of Constantine's early career as emperor. It must be remembered that Eusebius' presentation of Constantine as a Christian (in VC 1.12-21) accords with the presentation of Gelasius of Caesarea, and not with his own invention of a conversion of Constantine. In the case of Constantine's speech at Nicaea, Gelasius provided both the beginning, which Eusebius omits, and the end, as also provided by Eusebius. There is no evidence that Gelasius invented the beginning. Eusebius should not be trusted too far regarding the Council of Nicaea, despite the labours of J. N. D. Kelly (*Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edn, New York 1981, pp. 211-26) to show that it is not absolutely necessary to believe that he was guilty of deliberate misrepresentation.

The nurturing justice of Almighty God paved for mankind many avenues to good works, and especially that notable and very brilliant one which, greater than any miracle, he brought together for us in the totality of the most holy law of the Catholic Church, the Lord's household of faith. We see that the peak of this mansion has reached to the light of the stars, and the foundations, even at the beginning of the work, we perceive so deeply and surely rooted that the whole world has come to know of it. From that peak, which stands over the rest, to the completion of the consummation [?] there appears an even and level course, brightly lit. Its [?] front, adorned with a starry seal, twelve pillars whiter than snow, which cannot be moved from the foundation of the faith, everlastingly support by the power of our saving God. The author of this mighty work gave piety to us who sincerely accept a just faith in his immortal law. Whoever would approach his gates does so only by reason of a chaste and pious desire and with the assurance of a pure mind. For him the saving disposition has brought forth a marvellous light of the world. I say, [?] from within the faith of men throughout the whole court of the Lord, honoured with flowering crowns gathers the fruit of immortality and makes clear, by bringing them into the open, the holy forces of human life. Again, from that place the heavenly majesty crowned [?] sketches the rewards of the age that is always being born, or rather, is already born, and those things nurtured with due praise adorn the complete perfection of the work. This same house of the Lord is guarded by only two watchmen: godly fear comes as a corrector to the thoughts of some, and the praise of God is always present to the wise as a reward of their understanding. With these two seated in the porch of the most holy place the doors open to receive justice, and she dwelling within remains in her purity, but to injustice it is not lawful to approach the doors, and she is turned away and locked out of this place. These things that are so clear, most honoured and praiseworthy brethren, brought me to the brightness of the eternal and immortal light, for fear that if I remained at a distance a doubtful faith might make me out of harmony with the truth.

But what shall I first affirm? — the form of happiness which is hidden within my breast, or the divine favours conferred on me by Almighty God, whose number it would be a vast work to tell, when this same God of ours and father of all things took my modest talents into his service? Believe me, most honoured brethren, and apply a serene faith to what I say: however happy my mind, filled with the divine favours, seems to be, and however outstanding the praises it seems able to render, nevertheless, as faith in the truth clearly shows, neither voice nor tongue can meet the command of the mind, as is quite understandable. For the magnitude of the favours is immeasurable . . . [etc.]

We may now concentrate on the direct evidence itself. In 314 he said that there were at first (*primitus*) in him things which seemed to fall short of justice (*quae iustitia carere videbantur*), and that he did not think that the supernal power could see any of the secrets of his heart. He declared that he was unworthy. This clearly recalls a period before a religious development which produced what he thought was a moral improvement. In 325 he said that he had realized that injustice was excluded from the house of the Lord, and that he had become afraid that a doubtful faith might make him out of harmony with the truth. Here the moral concern is just as strong and is again part of a religious development, but the concern with truth is more clear. The statements are different, but not at all inconsistent.

None of this has anything to do with a conversion by a miracle. The development indicated is a Christian one: there is no pagan starting-point. Neither do the statements demonstrate ignorance, or superstition, or crass opportunism, or any other of the faults which should appear here if the plentiful theories of modern scholarship on the subject of Constantine's religion are to be justified. Taken by itself the first statement is that of a Christian recalling a time when his religion was not very important to him; the second is that of a Christian recalling how he made a more serious approach to his religion because he thought that it was a necessary guide to truth and righteousness. The proper way to deal with the statements is not to try to force them to conform to this or that theory, but to ask questions, such as the following. Can there have been circumstances in which such an approach could have been made? If so, can those circumstances be ascertained? How do the statements relate to other statements made by Constantine about himself or about the subjects mentioned in these letters?

Now, there is nothing impossible or even improbable about the sort of change which Constantine mentioned in these two texts. We are not dealing with bizarre claims, but with statements which clearly deserve serious consideration. There are two important Constantinian documents which should have been studied in this connection — the *Speech to the assembly of the saints*, and the *Letter of 324 to the eastern provincials* which is quoted by Eusebius in the *Vita Constantini* 2.24-42.

In the concluding chapters (22-26) of the *Speech* Constantine referred to his christianizing mission and to God's blessings upon it, described the persecution, and contrasted the Christian religion with the cruelty of Decius and Valerian. In chapter 25 he described Diocletian's persecution and continued:

At length, indeed, the providence of God took vengeance on these unhallowed deeds; but not without severe damage to the state. For the entire army of the emperor of whom I have just spoken [i.e., Diocletian], becoming subject to the authority of a worthless person [i.e., Maxentius],<sup>10</sup> who had violently usurped the supreme authority at Rome, when the providence of God was restoring freedom to that great city was destroyed in several successive battles.<sup>11</sup>

The natural interpretation of the last chapters of the *Speech* is that the whole war against Maxentius was part of the mission.

It has already been recognized that the address to the bishops at Nicaea has several echoes of the *Speech*.<sup>12</sup> It is even more important to recognize that the address at Nicaea also echoes the *Letter* to the bishops at Arles quite strongly. The themes of justice, gratitude, God's willingness to guide

10. How Diocletian's army came under the control of Maxentius is described on p. 580 (note 4) of the translation listed in note 11 below.

11. The translation used here is that in the second series of the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds), New York 1890, Vol. 1, pp. 578-80. I have corrected the translation of the end of this passage from 'Rome (when the providence of God restored freedom to that great city), was destroyed in several successive battles'. The 'restored' of the translation did not render the present participle correctly.

12. See the notes to Gelasius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.7, 1-18 in Loeschke's edition. See note 7 above.

men, the church as the repository of his truth, the limitless benefits which God has conferred upon Constantine his servant, all recur. This means that Constantine's themes in 324 were not mere postwar propaganda, for they are the themes of 314. The consistency indicates that these ideas were important to Constantine and makes it all the more desirable to determine the circumstances in which the religious development occurred.

In the passage of the address at Nicaea quoted above, Constantine referred to his christianizing mission and to God's blessings upon it.<sup>13</sup> Later in that same speech, at sections 35-38, Constantine included the war against Maxentius in the christianizing mission. In his *Letter* of 324 to the eastern provincials Constantine described his christianizing mission as something begun in Britain, in response to the Great Persecution.<sup>14</sup> This is quite consistent with the statement of Lactantius that Constantine's first action on becoming emperor (i.e., in 306) was to restore the Christians to their worship and their God.<sup>15</sup> It is also consistent with the plain meaning of the inscription on the Arch of Constantine, which is that God prompted Constantine to wage the entire war against Maxentius and his faction, not just to fight the final battle against them.<sup>16</sup> In his *Letter* of 314 to the bishops at Arles Constantine said that there were at first (*primitus*) in him things which fell short of righteousness. The *primitus* is not very specific, but coming from a man forty years old, it ought to refer to a period earlier than 312. The economical explanation of all these facts is that Constantine's statements regarding his mission are true.

This conclusion may be tested against the evidence of the *Letter* of 324 to the people of the eastern provinces. Constantine began with an elaborate condemnation of the persecution and the persecutors, and went on to urge his subjects to become Christians. In describing the beginning of the persecution he told how the oracle of Apollo claimed that the righteous of the earth were causing interference with the proper functioning of the oracle.<sup>17</sup> He then said that when he was young he heard Diocletian ask who these righteous (or just) people were, and also heard a pagan priest answer that they were the Christians. The result of this was the Great Persecution, which Constantine described as a cruel and wicked civil war on the Christian population, waged by savage emperors of unsound mind who could not see the truth.<sup>18</sup>

The personal references in this document have been ignored because they do not suit any conversion theory, but they throw considerable light on Constantine's statements concerning his religious development. The connection of truth with justice, the Lord's household of faith, and the strengthening of Constantine's faith recur again. It is clear from the *Letter* that Constantine regarded the errors of paganism as the road to unjust behaviour, and the Great Persecution as conclusive proof of the necessity

13. Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.7.

14. *VC* 2.28-9.

15. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 24, 9.

16. I discussed some of the relevant material in 'Constantine's Conversion' pp. 423-5; see note 1 above.

17. *VC* 2.49-51.

18. *VC* 2.48-54.

of Christian belief. The persecution, according to him, was a disgrace to the human mind and heart, and to the Roman empire which because of it had been brought lower than barbarism.<sup>19</sup> Its promoters had been convicted by the testimony of their own oracle, and damned to hell. Their doom and the success of God's servant demonstrate the rightness of Constantine's actions.<sup>20</sup>

In his very influential *Christianity and Classical Culture* Cochrane treated such statements as nothing more than the preaching of a 'religion of success'.<sup>21</sup> That conclusion is unduly severe. Constantine was in fact both religious and successful. It is arguable, in the absence of evidence, that he would not have been religious if he had not been successful, but it is not demonstrable. Constantine evidently regarded his success as a proof of God's favour, and he pointed to that proof in statements to both Christians and pagans. Moreover, he said that the demonstrations of God's power — and he surely meant demonstrations in his own favour — had strengthened his own faith.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, it would be unwise to overrate these claims. It would be interesting if his success had weakened Constantine's faith, or if he had developed a desire to fail; the actual situation is simply natural. The important point for our subject is that when Constantine spoke of his own religious development he mentioned an advance towards truth and justice. It seems fair to conclude that in his own life he had acted on the claim made in this letter (VC 2.56) that only those can lead a pure and holy life whom God calls to a reliance upon his holy laws. Constantine does not say that he actually succeeded in living a pure and holy life. He says that he became God's servant, and that God conferred innumerable blessings on him.

It is now apparent that the results of interpreting Constantine's statements in a normal way are very different from the results of ignoring them or of torturing them into conformity with the inventions of Eusebius. A simple, and powerful, argument further recommends the normal procedure. Constantine made great efforts to persuade his pagan subjects to become Christians. If he had been converted to Christianity by a miracle, and had then gone on to his great successes, his own conversion would have been the central theme of his preaching. That is to say, the Constantinian documents would actually contain the inventions of Eusebius. Since they do nothing of the sort, we should ignore the inventions, and deal with Constantine's statements on Constantine's terms.

Thus far we have been considering a development which seems most likely to have been a response to the Great Persecution, and which manifested itself in the christianizing mission. However, there is no reason at this point to exclude the possibility that the change took place earlier. Since there is no pagan starting-point we should look to the family. It is clear that Eusebius of Caesarea regarded Constantius Chlorus as a crypto-Christian.<sup>23</sup> In this he did not disagree with the other Christian

19. VC 2.53.

20. VC 2.54-5.

21. C. N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, Oxford 1944, pp. 177-212.

22. VC 2.55.

23. VC 1.13-17.

writers. However, Eusebius claimed that Constantine was responsible for his mother's conversion to Christianity.<sup>24</sup> On this point he was contradicted by Gelasius of Caesarea and by Theodoret.<sup>25</sup> The conversion of Helena by Constantine, like the false claim that Constantine arrived in Britain to find Constantius near death in 306,<sup>26</sup> may be nothing more than a product of Eusebius' theory that Constantine was converted. I think that the correct account of the matter is that of Gelasius, who said that Constantius and Helena were equally responsible for the Christian upbringing of Constantine. Regarding that upbringing we know only a couple of the results. Constantine presumably did not profess Christianity publicly; but he did not consider himself ever to have been a pagan. I realize that it might be argued that such a person was not really a Christian at all. However, such a rigorous view cannot be very helpful with regard to a person's religious development. I regard both Constantine and his father as Christians living in very special circumstances.<sup>27</sup>

Gelasius of Caesarea said that Constantius bequeathed his empire to Constantine because he knew that Constantine would end the persecution. Gelasius also said that Constantius declared this conviction to his friends.<sup>28</sup> This is consistent with Constantine's prompt and public abolition of the persecution after he became an emperor in 306; but it does not throw any additional light on his religious development before 306.

The relationship of Constantine's upbringing and religious development to his career cannot be determined with certainty for the following reason. He had been with Diocletian for about ten years, and was about thirty years old when the Great Persecution was begun in 303. We cannot know whether either or both of Galerius' successes in persuading Diocletian to persecute in 303, and to exclude Constantine from the imperial college in 305,<sup>29</sup> had any relation to a suspicion that Constantius and Constantine were Christians, or at least too Christian for comfort. It follows that we cannot know whether Constantine's nearer approach to Christianity had occurred earlier.

I think, however, that there is sufficient reason for dating the change of which Constantine speaks to the period after the beginning of the persecution. In both of the passages which I have quoted he refers to God's immeasurable blessings upon his servant, and in the speech at Nicea he links those to God's taking of Constantine into his service. In the *Letter* to the eastern provincials it is clear that he regarded that service both as a response to the persecution and as something which began in Britain. It seems to me that there were strong connections in Constantine's mind

24. VC 3.47.

25. Theodoret's statement in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.18 is copied by Gelasius of Cyzicus in his history (3.1, 7), with an addition from Gelasius of Caesarea. Cf. Winkelmann, 'Untersuchungen', pp. 18-20.

26. Eusebius' claim in VC 1.27 is contradicted by *Origo* 4 (= *Anonymus Valesii* or *Excerptia Valesiana*) and *Panegyrici Latini* 6(7).7, 1ff. The point is discussed in my article, 'Constantine's Conversion', pp. 427-8.

27. I have discussed the question of the religion of Constantius in 'Constantine's Conversion', pp. 421-3.

28. Winkelmann, 'Untersuchungen', pp. 18-20.

29. Cf. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 19; and T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge Mass., 1981, p. 26.

between the persecution, his own response thereto and God's blessings upon the christianizing mission. The strong connection between truth and justice is easily explained as a product of reaction to the persecution.

It is against this background that I view the rival evidence of the *Panegyrici Latini*, including the supposed 'pagan vision' of Constantine in 310. The unproven assumption that the panegyrics (and the coins)<sup>30</sup> provided evidence regarding Constantine's personal beliefs resulted in an extensive literature which is still used. The material on the panegyrics was superseded in 1983 when Barbara Rodgers showed that the panegyrist of 310 had identified Constantine with Augustus and not with Apollo, as had previously been assumed.<sup>31</sup> Earlier arguments about the 'pagan vision' in this panegyric had suffered from the identification of the London Papyrus 878, because the letter of Constantine in which he blamed Apollo's oracle for starting the Great Persecution was shown to be authentic.<sup>32</sup> In a later study Rodgers further demonstrated the need for restraint in the use of the evidence of the panegyrics.<sup>33</sup> Maximian, Constantine, and Theodosius each heard a man call him a god. So far as anyone knows, none of these three emperors found the epithet objectionable.<sup>34</sup> Now, Rodgers' study indicates that even before 312 Constantine's panegyrists felt a need to soft-pedal the pagan gods.<sup>35</sup> That Theodosius' panegyrist could have called him a god is another warning against the conclusion that the paganism of a panegyrist reflects paganism of the emperor. In these circumstances the burden of proof is on those who wish to argue from the religion of this official propaganda to the religion of Constantine.

I will conclude by setting what I regard as the probable development against the historical background. As a young man Constantine was presumably content to watch the peaceful spread of Christianity and to wait for his own promotion into the imperial college. The persecution endangered and outraged him, but the best course of action was to wait until the (presumably planned) retirement of Diocletian and Maximian resulted in an imperial college which could and would stop it. Two years later, on 1 May 305, he was excluded from the succession. I see no reason to doubt that his departure from the eastern court soon afterwards was a flight.<sup>36</sup> He was with Constantius for about a year before succeeding him on 25 July 306. Constantine was younger and stronger, and he had the advantage of starting out with the Christian officers whom Constantius had gathered about him. The quiet defensive activity of Constantius on

30. Regarding the coins, I have heartily welcomed the bold and sensible statement of Barnes (in *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 48) that Constantine's *Sol Invictus* coinage 'attests not imperial devotion to a vague solar monotheism, but the dead weight of iconographic tradition'. I would add that it was not prudent until 324 to discard such iconography.

31. Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 'Constantine's Pagan Vision', *Byzantion*, Vol. 50, 1980, pp. 259-78 cites the earlier literature.

32. A. H. M. Jones and T. C. Skeat, 'Notes on the Genuineness of the Constantinian Documents in Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, October 1954, pp. 196-200.

33. Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 'Divine Insinuation in the *Panegyrici Latini*', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 35, 1986, pp. 69-104.

34. Rodgers, 'Divine Insinuation in the *Panegyrici Latini*', p. 99.

35. Rodgers, 'Divine Insinuation', pp. 73-5.

36. Cf. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 24 and Eusebius, *VC* 1.20.

behalf of the Christians was replaced by the abolition of the persecution in Constantine's realm. But there was more to it than that. During the persecution Constantine had become much more interested in his religion, and much more aware of duties to God. It was at this time, I think, that he became, as he later styled himself, 'the man of God'.<sup>37</sup> This man of God lived in circumstances in which no Christian had lived before, and he did not become the first imperial martyr. According to him, the persecutors had begun a civil war. He meant to end it.

37. The expression is used in his letter 'to Arius and the Arians with him'. See *Urkunde* 34.38 in H.-G. Opitz, *Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streitens* 318-328. *Athanasius Werke* 3.1, Berlin and Leipzig 1934.