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CONSTANTINE'S EXPLANATION OF HIS CAREER

A.

By the year 325 Constantine had said on at least four occasions that he had pursued his whole imperial career in the service of God. His statements to this effect have received very little attention because they cannot be reconciled with the popular speculation of Eusebius that Constantine was converted to Christianity by a miracle just before he attacked Maxentius in 312. However, Eusebius' speculation is to be distinguished from Constantine's own claim that God showed him by a miracle how to make the *labarum*, the banner under which he won his civil wars. When that distinction has been made it appears that Eusebius' story about a conversion cannot stand against the rest of the contemporary evidence (1). Now, Eusebius' 312 conversion was the only thing in the ancient contemporary evidence which contradicted the emperor's statements about his career, so that modern conjectures regarding his motives are now unsupported by any contemporary refutation of his statements. It is possible, therefore, that, however untrustworthy the statements of emperors may be, Constantine's explanation of his career is correct. If that is the case, he was much more committed to a christianizing mission at a much earlier date than anyone has thought, and his career should be looked at in a new light. In these circumstances his statements should be heard again.

In his *Life of Constantine*, 2.24-42, Eusebius quotes a letter which Constantine wrote to the pagans of the East after the final

defeat of Licinius in 324. After setting forth the troubles caused by the persecutors the emperor describes (ch. 28) his christianizing mission as having started at the Atlantic and having proceeded until he got control of the East (2).

And now, with such a mass of impiety (3) oppressing the human race, and the commonwealth in danger of being utterly destroyed, as if by the agency of some pestilential disease, and therefore needing powerful and effectual aid; what was the relief, and what the remedy which the Divinity devised for these evils? ... I myself, then, was the instrument whose services He chose, and esteemed suitable for the accomplishment of his will. Accordingly, beginning at the remote Britannic ocean, and the regions where, according to the law of nature, the sun sinks beneath the horizon (4), through the aid of divine power I banished and utterly removed every form of evil which prevailed, in the hope that the human race, enlightened through my instrumentality, might be recalled to a due observance of the holy laws of God, and at the same time our most blessed faith might prosper under the guidance of his almighty hand.

It was probably soon after this letter, in December of 324, that Constantine wrote the letter to Alexander and Arius which urges them to resolve their theological dispute. It begins as follows.

That I had a twofold purpose for these things for the execution of which I undertook the duty, I make a witness God himself, as is reasonable, the helper of my undertakings and the saviour of all. For I have been eager, first, to unify the mental disposition of all peoples concerning the Deity into a single structure of a settled state and second, to restore and unite the body of the whole world, which had suffered like as if with some painful wound. And taking provision for these objects, I was calculating

(2) For the proof of the authenticity of *Vita Constantini*, 2.28 see A. H. M. JONES, *Notes on the Genuineness of the Constantinian Documents in Eusebius's Life of Constantine*, in *JEH*, 5 (1954), pp. 196-200. The translation quoted below is that in the second series of the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by P. SCHAFF and H. WACE, New York, 1890, vol. I, p. 507. It is also used below for Constantine's *Speech to the assembly of the saints*, and will be cited hereafter by page number only.

(3) *I.e.*, the Persecution.

(4) This has to refer to the beginning of his reign in Britain: cf. ELLIOTT, *Conversion*, pp. 423-425.

(1) On this point see T. G. ELLIOTT, *Constantine's Conversion: Do We Really Need It?*, in *Phoenix*, 41.4 (1987), pp. 420-438 (hereafter cited as ELLIOTT, *Conversion*); *Constantine's Early Religious Development*, in *JRH*, 15.3 (1989), pp. 283-291.

the one with the secret eye of thought and I was endeavouring to correct the other by the power of military force, knowing that, if I should establish according to my prayers a mental concord common to all God's servants, the intercourse of public affairs also would reap the change corresponding with the pious dispositions of all ⁽⁵⁾.

Editors take it that Constantine refers here only to his campaigns against Licinius, and that the "painful wound" was the dissension between himself and Licinius. The same interpretation is applied to Constantine's reference to his victories over "the tyrants" in his exhortation to the bishops at the Council of Nicaea in 325 ⁽⁶⁾. There is no need, however, to restrict Constantine's references thus. The "painful wound" is more easily taken to refer to the persecutions because in the concluding chapters of his *Speech to the assembly of the saints*, which may have been delivered on Good Friday of 325, Constantine makes it clear that his christianizing mission involved fighting against Maxentius as well as Licinius. In the final chapter he says that all of his successes were the result of his faithful and prayerful service of God. Chapter 22 begins as follows ⁽⁷⁾.

To thee, Piety, I ascribe the cause of my own prosperity, and of all that I now possess. To this truth the happy issue of all my endeavors bears testimony; brave deeds, victories in war, and triumphs over conquered foes. This truth the great city itself allows with joy and praise. The people, too, of that much-loved

(5) This is *VC*, 2.64, translated by P. R. COLEMAN-NORTON in *Roman State and Christian Church*, London, 1966, vol. I, pp. 114-115. For the date see T. D. BARNES, *Emperor and Bishops*, *A.D.* 324-342: *Some Problems*, in *AJAH*, 3 (1978), pp. 54-56. This was reprinted in the *Variorum Reprints* (London) series, no. CS207 (1984), *Early Christianity in the Roman Empire*. This chronology is assumed in BARNES' *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, Mass., 1981 (hereafter cited as *CE*), pp. 212-214. The Greek (in F. WINKEL-MANN's Berlin edition of 1975) of the sentence about the painful wound is as follows: *Πρώτον μὲν γὰρ τὴν ἀπάντων τῶν ἔθνων περὶ τὸ θεῖον πρόθεσιν [εἰς] μίαν ἐξέως σύστασιν ἐνώσαι, δεύτερον δὲ τὸ τῆς κοινῆς οἰκουμένης σῶμα καθάπερ χάλειψ̃ τινι τραύματι πεπονηκὸς ἀνακτήσασθαι καὶ συναρμόσαι προθυμίῃν*.

(6) The documents are collected in COLEMAN-NORTON, vol. I, pp. 129-133.

(7) Pp. 578-580 of the translation.

city accord in the same sentiment, though once, deceived by ill-grounded hopes, they chose a ruler unworthy of themselves, a ruler who speedily received the chastisement which his audacious deeds deserved.

Constantine goes on to describe the Persecution and to contrast the Christian religion with the cruelty of Decius and Valerian. In chapter 25 he describes Diocletian's persecution and continues:

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, becoming subject to the authority of a worthless person ⁽⁸⁾, 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 ⁽⁹⁾.

Chapter 26 begins:

When men commend my services, which owe their origin to the inspiration of Heaven, do they not clearly establish the truth that God is the cause of the exploits I have performed? Assuredly they do: for it belongs to God to do whatever is best, and to man, to perform the commands of God. I believe, indeed, the best and noblest course of action is, when, before an attempt is made, we provide as far as possible for a secure result: and surely all men know that the holy service in which these hands have been employed has originated in pure and genuine faith towards God; that whatever has been done for the common welfare has been effected by active exertion combined with supplication and prayer; the consequence of which has been as

(8) Note 4 on p. 580 of the translation describes how Diocletian's army came under the control of Maxentius.

(9) 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. The Greek of I. HEIKEL's Leipzig edition of 1902 (*GCS*, 7) reads as follows: *τέλος γούν τὴν τῶν ἀνοσίων ἔργων ἐκδικίαν ἢ θεῶ πρόνοια μετήλθεν, οὐ μὴν ἄνευ δημοσίας βλάβης τοσαῦται γούν ἐγένοντο σφαγαί, ὅσαι εἰ κατὰ βαρβάρων ἐγένοντο, ἱκανὰς εἶναι πρὸς αἰωνίαν εἰρήνην. πᾶν γὰρ τὸ τοῦ προεξηρημένου βασιλέως στράτευμα, ὑποταχθέν ἐξουσίᾳ τινὸς ἀχρήστου βία τε τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν ἀρπάσαντος, προνοίας θεοῦ τὴν μεγάλην πόλιν ἐλευθερούσης, πολλοὺς καὶ παντοδαποὺς πολέμοις ἀνήλωται*.

great an amount of individual and public benefit as each could venture to hope for himself and those he holds most dear.

The inclusion of the war against Maxentius in the christianizing mission was also affirmed in Constantine's exhortation to the bishops at the Council of Nicaea in 325. A part of this speech quoted by Gelasius of Cyzicus reads as follows ⁽¹⁰⁾.

In order that we may see that a lawless condition of the world brought forth the forgiveness of God when the habit of the earlier sin was instilled by the wiles of the Devil into the miserable souls of perverse men, we may obtain from the divine law a clear demonstration of the matter. For whom that time when the divine and holy ordinance was not being observed with the proper care by those two put on earth in the beginning, the flower of sin later arose: it became established and greatly increased, as a result of which those two aforementioned were cast out by the divine will. And when the world had been brought to such a condition with the perversity of men that He condemned its foundations in both the East and the West, and the excess of the Devil's power had seized and enfeebled the minds of men (Loeschke put an asterisk into his text at this point) in this

(10) GELASIUS, *HE*, 2.7.35-38, edited by G. LOESCHKE (and M. HEINE-MANN) in *GCS*, Leipzig, 1918. Gelasius provides more of this speech than do the other Church historians. Writing in about 475 he says in his preface that he got the speech from a very old book which had belonged to Dalmatius, the archbishop of Cyzicus. Loeschke's text of the passage quoted reads as follows: "ἵνα δὲ εἴη ἰδὲν, ὅτι τις ἀθέμιτος κόσμος πολιτεία τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ ἀγνοσίαν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἀπειργάσατο, λογισμοῦ ἀμαρτήματος προτέρου τεχθέντος ἐκ πλάνης τοῦ ἐχθροῦ ἐν ταῖς τῶν σκαίων ἀνθρώπων ἀθλίαις ψυχαῖς, ἐκ τοῦ θείου νόμου λαβεῖν ἡμᾶς ἐνεστὶ σαφὴ τὴν περὶ τούτου ἀπόδειξιν. ἐξ ἐκείνου γὰρ καιροῦ, ἐξ οὗ ὑπὸ τῶν δύο ἐκείνων τῶν ἐν ἀρχῇ κατασταθέντων τῶ θεῶν καὶ ἄγιον πρόσταγμα μετὰ τῆς προσηκούσης ἐπιμελείας οὐκ ἐφυλάχθη, ἐτέχθη μετὰ ταῦτα τῆς προσηγορίας ταύτης τὸ ἄνθος· γέγονε δὲ συνεχὲς καὶ μᾶλλον ἐπηύξησεν, ἐξ οὗ καὶ οἱ προειρημένοι δύο θεῶν νεύματι ἀτεβλήθησαν: ἕως δὲ τσούτου ἡ ἡλὴ αὐτὴ μετὰ τῆς σκαίτητος τῶν ἀνθρώπων προήχθη, ὥστε τῆς τε ἐφάας καὶ τῶν πρὸς δύσιν κρητίδιον κατεψηφίσατο: αὐτὴ τε ἡ ὑπερβολὴ τῆς ἐναντίας δυνάμεως τὰς διανοίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων κατέλαβε καὶ ἡμαύρωσεν. * ἐν ᾧ μέντοι προστάγματι ἅγιος καὶ ἀθάνατος ἐστὶ τοῦ πάντα δυνάμενου θεοῦ ὁ ἀκάματος οἶκτος, πάσαις γὰρ ταῖς ἡμέραις καὶ τοῖς χρόνοις τοῖς παρεληλυθόσι ἀναριθμήτους τῶν δῆμων πολυπληθείας ἀπὸ τοῦ βάρους τούτου δι' ἐμοῦ τοῦ αὐτοῦ θεράποντος ὁ θεὸς δεδοικμένης ἐλευθεροῖ, καὶ εἰς ἐντελὴ αἰωνίου φωτός ἐξάξει λαμπρότητα.

command is (?) the holy, immortal, unwearying mercy of Almighty God. For through me his servant God is freeing from this burden those innumerable peoples who have been enslaved for all time past and will bring them to the perfect brightness of the eternal light (my translation).

The reference to God's dissatisfaction with both East and West which led to his use of Constantine indicates that Constantine included his war against Maxentius in his christianizing mission. The last of these statements is to be found in his letter to Sapor, which Eusebius quotes at *VC*, 4.9 ⁽¹¹⁾. It begins:

By keeping the Divine faith, I am made a partaker of the light of truth: guided by the light of truth, I advance in the knowledge of the Divine faith. Hence it is that, as my actions themselves evince, I profess the most holy religion; and this worship I declare to be that which teaches me deeper acquaintance with the most holy God; aided by whose Divine power, beginning from the very borders of the ocean, I have aroused each nation of the world in succession to a well-grounded hope of security; so that those which, groaning in servitude to the most cruel tyrants, and yielding to the pressure of their daily sufferings, had well nigh been utterly destroyed, have been restored by my agency to a far happier state.

It is necessary to conclude that the emperor repeatedly presented his whole career as a christianizing mission. I do not take him to mean that every single thing he did was done with a christianizing purpose, but rather that that was his main purpose from the beginning. When I decided to collect such statements I did not think that there would be so many of them, or that they would be so positive.

It is, of course, possible that in 324 he had started to regard himself as an *imperator naturaliter christianus*, and that his statements at this time and later are not to be taken as a good indicator of when the mission began. One might suppose that they are either wishful thinking or simply false. The *Sol Invictus* coinage, the title of *pontifex maximus* and the ambiguous language of the Arch of Constantine in Rome could all be used to support rejection of Constantine's claims. The most serious

(11) P. 543 of the translation.

difficulty with such an argument is the fact that it was certainly against Constantine's interest before the final defeat of Licinius (it would, indeed, have been suicidal) to present himself as a Christian ready to fight civil wars for religious reasons. In those circumstances actions which would have reassured pagans who were uneasy about the emperor's religion do not prove that his statements about his mission are not true. His retention of the title (and office) of *pontifex maximus* at a time when the genuineness of his christianizing efforts cannot reasonably be doubted shows that he paid attention to the feelings of pagans. It is absence of such attention which would be remarkable. Even after the victory of 324 it was not altogether a good idea for him to admit to having fought civil wars for religious reasons, because pagans might decide to imitate his example. Apparently he thought that it was more important to ascribe his success to God than to keep silent about the possible results of a Christian's decision to serve God⁽¹²⁾.

In addition to these reasons for not publishing his explanation, there seems to have been no reason for inventing it in the first place. Compared to Eusebius' conversion by miracle in 311-312 it is quite dull. The chosen favourite of God — *caelitus invitatus ad fidem*, as Rufinus was later to put it⁽¹³⁾ — is replaced, on Constantine's account, by just another Christian who had escaped the Great Persecution. A further disadvantage is the absence of common ground with the pagans, whom he was urging to become Christians: surely his exhortations would have been improved by statements that he himself had been one of them until God enlightened him. I do not see what he stood to gain by inventing what he says (there was nothing wrong with being a convert), and the disadvantages of his story as compared with that of Eusebius suggest to me that it was Constantine, if either of these two, who told the truth. The removal of the conversion, and therewith the ancient evidence against Constantine's explanation, does not create evidence in favour of it, but it does make desirable a test of his claims. I would make that in four parts — with

(12) Regarding this question see my article *The Language of Constantine's Propaganda*, in *TAPA*, 120 (1990), pp. 349-353.

(13) *HE*, 9.8-9.

regard to (i) the years 306-312, (ii) the campaign of 312 against Maxentius, (iii) the war of 316-317 against Licinius, (iv) the war of 324 against Licinius.

B.

I

Constantine's legislation of 306 restoring Christians' right to worship their God⁽¹⁴⁾, and the presence of Christian advisors with him when he went to war against Maxentius in 312⁽¹⁵⁾ are now generally regarded as facts. Opinion varies as to their significance. Here it is necessary only to note their accord with Constantine's explanation⁽¹⁶⁾.

II

As regards the campaign against Maxentius, Constantine's claims accord well with the important facts. In 312 he protested against the persecuting activities of Maximinus⁽¹⁷⁾, and made a pact with Licinius. By this pact Licinius' efforts, which Galerius had wished to direct against Maxentius, were turned against Maximinus. Constantine himself attacked Maxentius. When the dust had settled Constantine was the senior Augustus, and he began to have trouble with Licinius⁽¹⁸⁾. All this has been regarded as evidence that Constantine had a "boundless lust for power"⁽¹⁹⁾. However, since no proponent of that theory has explained why Constantine waited seven years between his two victorious

(14) For discussion of Lactantius' statement cf. A. ALFÖLDI, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, Oxford, 1948 (reprinted 1969), p. 8; T. D. BARNES, *art. cit.*, pp. 44-46.

(15) On this point see ALFÖLDI, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-15.

(16) I have dealt with Constantine's "pagan vision" of 310 in *Constantine's Early Religious Development*, in *JRH*, 15.3 (1989), pp. 283-291 and *The Language of Constantine's Propaganda*, in *TAPA*, 120 (1990), p. 349.

(17) For a 311 date, BARNES, *Lactantius and Constantine*, in *JRS*, 63 (1973), pp. 44-46. Against that date and in favour of a date late in 312, after Constantine's victory against Maxentius, J. L. CREED in his edition of Lactantius' *DMP*, 115 (commenting on *DMP*, 37.1).

(18) For the narrative, BARNES, *CE*, pp. 40-43 and 62-65.

(19) A. ALFÖLDI, *op. cit.*, p. 13, following many others.

campaigns against Licinius, the theory has no force against Constantine's claims. In 311 and 312 Constantine did not know that Licinius would be successful against Maximinus. He did know that, whatever happened, the victor would not be a Christian. Therefore his attack on Maxentius was consistent with an attempt to end persecution whether Maxentius were a persecutor nor not, for Constantine would not be safe if Maximinus defeated Licinius. Nor could he proceed further with a christianizing mission from an inferior position⁽²⁰⁾. This argument is not affected by the fact that other reasons can be given for Constantine's attack on Maxentius, because even if Constantine acted from a desire for power or from hatred or fear of Maxentius there is no evidence that any other motive⁽²¹⁾ was stronger than that which he describes in his several statements. The sources which indicate a religious reason for this campaign may now be considered.

First, the Arch, all of whose words can now receive proper consideration. The inscription on the side referring to the *decennalia* indicates that it was dedicated in 315, and the inscription in its attic (694 in Dessau) must have been ordered well before that. This reads as follows:

imp. Caes. Fl. Constantino maximo
p. f. Augusto s. p. q. R.,
quod instinctu divinitatis, mentis
magnitudine, cum exercitu suo
tam de tyranno quam de omnis eius
factione uno tempore iustis
rem publicam ultus est armis,
arcum triumphis insignem dicavit.

It is the obvious implication of the inscription that a divinity prompted Constantine to the entire war⁽²²⁾. In order to believe

(20) I have assumed that a neutral distressed by persecution of the Christians would not have regarded civil war as a lesser evil.

(21) For these other reasons, BARNES, *CE*, pp. 40f. I am not arguing here that Constantine did not act from mixed motives.

(22) I take it that the reason for the ambiguity of *instinctu divinitatis* was the emperor's wish to avoid giving offence to pagans. Until the final defeat of Licinius Constantine always used neutral language with regard to religion in his public statements. His language to bishops was very different.

that the impulse of the divinity led only to a final, post-conversion, victory one has to imagine Constantine as starting the war on his own, but needing a nudge from God in order to finish it. That is a very odd interpretation, and it is contradicted by the plural *triumphis* and by the sculptures showing the earlier victories of the campaign. The only trouble with accepting the implication that God prompted the whole war might be the *uno tempore*, which could be thought to fit better with a post-conversion victory at the Milvian Bridge than with the whole campaign. However, such a construction of *uno tempore* cannot include the campaign in the North of Italy against parts of "the whole faction" of Maxentius, which appears in the sculptures, and it is quite misleading as to how Constantine eliminated Maxentius. Furthermore, there is no need to suppose that *uno tempore* refers to a single day. It presumably contrasts the victory of Constantine on his first try with the past failures of the tetrarchy as represented by Severus and Galerius⁽²³⁾. Such a construction of *uno tempore* does not cause troubles with the rest of the text, and of the Arch.

The next source is a passage (at ll. 467-488) of Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum*, of 402-3⁽²⁴⁾. Prudentius described Constantine as a Christian attacking the tyrant Maxentius, and said nothing about a conversion. His account is consistent with Lactantius' story of painting the monogram on the shields just before the final battle⁽²⁵⁾. Even though Prudentius, unlike Lactantius, repeated the propaganda about the tyranny of Maxentius, his text implies that Constantine had a religious motive for the war as well as a wish to end a tyranny⁽²⁶⁾.

At about the same time as Prudentius wrote, Rufinus, using the *HE* of Eusebius and the *HE* of Gelasius of Caesarea, produced

(23) Cf. R. T. RIDLEY, *Anonymity in the Vita Constantini*, in *Byzantion*, 50 (1980), p. 245.

(24) For the date, M. SCHANZ, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur*, Munich, expanded second edition of 1914 (reprinted in 1970), vol. IV, p. 249.

(25) ELLIOTT, *Conversion*, pp. 428-429 and note 50.

(26) The evidence of Prudentius is unimportant as coming long after 312, but interesting as coming from one who knew both the Eusebian and the orthodox views of the campaign of 312.

an account of the war as follows (27). Constantine, an unbaptized Christian, prepared a campaign against the tyrant Maxentius. He was worried about it, and prayed for divine help. In a dream he saw a fiery cross gleaming in the Western sky, and heard some angels standing by him say "Constantine, conquer by this". He had thus been invited to the faith by God, as St. Paul had been, but with this difference — that his invitation had come when he already was a Christian. He made a banner, called the *labarum*, in the form of a cross. Now certain of victory, he began to worry about the fact that he, an emperor, was waging a civil war, and that involving an attack on Rome itself. He prayed that he might not have to shed Roman blood. God answered his prayer. Maxentius decided to attack Constantine, and forgot that he himself had ordered the Milvian Bridge broken and made into a trap. He rode out onto the trick bridge, and fell into the river, so that by the loss of this one accursed person Constantine was spared the necessity of fighting a civil war.

This amusing travesty is partly, I think, the result of a moral problem. Rufinus thought that Constantine had a religious reason for this war, but the pagan usurpations of the fourth century had diminished the appetite of some Christians for religious wars. Eusebius' triumphant attitude was out-of-date. Rufinus could not solve his problem by presenting Constantine as a pagan at the outset and a Christian fighting in self-defence on the morning of the final battle, because he did not believe the story of a conversion. Therefore he simply eliminated the war.

It happens that we are not dependent upon the unreliable Rufinus for the claim that Constantine was a Christian when he decided to attack Maxentius. The account of one of his sources, Gelasius of Caesarea, is preserved and cited by Gelasius of Cyzicus in his *Ecclesiastical History*. It presented Constantine as a Christian before the decision to attack Maxentius, had nothing on the campaign in the North of Italy, and had a trick bridge. However, Gelasius does seem to have thought that there was a battle, and he does not say that Maxentius was the only

(27) MOMMSEN'S text of Rufinus, *HE*, 9.8-9 is in vol. II of *Eusebius Werke*, Leipzig, 1908, edited by E. SCHWARTZ, pp. 827 and 829.

person drowned (28). His rejection of Eusebius' conversion story tells more heavily against it than do those of Prudentius and Rufinus, for Gelasius could have checked Eusebius' conversion story with persons who did not hear of a conversion in Eusebius' oration at the *tricennalia* in 335, and then found it in the *VC*, just a few years after the *tricennalia*, but twenty-seven or so years after the alleged event.

It appears, then, that as regards the campaign of 311-312 Eusebius is the odd man out. The historical facts are consistent with Constantine's statements, with which the other Christian sources agree. In these circumstances it would not be proper to prefer Eusebius' claims to those of Constantine.

III

The cause of the war of Cibalae, of 316/17, is also problematic. In the *VC*, left unfinished in 339, Eusebius almost conflated the two wars with Licinius, and gave religious conflict as the reason for both (29). Such an eccentric (from the modern point of view) presentation has naturally caused difficulties, but it does not place Eusebius at odds with Constantine as regards the reason for the war of Cibalae. However, in the second and third (perhaps) editions of his *Ecclesiastical History*, written in 313-315 (perhaps), Eusebius had represented Licinius as a Christian deliverer of the East from Maximinus in 313 (30), and it is clear that Eusebius

(28) GELASIUS OF CYZICUS, *HE*, 1.3-7, which is agreed by everyone, on the basis of the citation of "Gelasios" in 1.8.1 to have been copied from the work of Gelasius of Caesarea. For a discussion of the passage cf. F. SCHEIDWEILER, *Die Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisareia*, in *ByzZ*, 46 (1953), pp. 293-296. There are three later articles by F. WINKELMANN on Gelasius of Caesarea — (i) *Untersuchungen zur Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisareia*, in *Sitzungsberichte der deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Klasse für Sprachen, Literatur und Kunst*, Nr. 3 (1965), 123 pp.; (ii) *Charakter und Bedeutung der Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisareia*, in *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 1 (1966), pp. 346-385; (iii) *Die Quellen der Historia Ecclesiastica des Gelasius von Cyzicus (ein Beitrag zur Rekonstruktion der Kirchengeschichte des Gelasius von Caesarea)*, in *Byzantinoslavica*, 27 (1966), pp. 104-130. Cf. my *Constantine's Conversion*, in *Phoenix*, 41.4. (29) *VC*, 1.48-2.18.

(30) *HE*, 9.11. For a recent discussion of the successive edition of the *HE*, T. D. BARNES, *The Editions of Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, in *GRBS*, 21 (1980), pp. 192-201.

then thought that Licinius' purge of Maximinus' associates was directed against the persecutors. Thus, each of his works could, in the absence of other information, be used to impugn the credit of the other⁽³¹⁾. For these troubles Eusebius is responsible. For other troubles he is not. It is agreed that he thought that both wars against Licinius occurred after Constantine's *decennalia* in 315⁽³²⁾. However, until the 1950s, scholars agreed with Godefroy's argument (of 1665)⁽³³⁾ that the first war was fought in 314. They also agreed with Tillemont⁽³⁴⁾ that those persecuting activities of Licinius specifically mentioned by Eusebius dated to the period before 324, but not before 314. Thus, in 1950 there seemed to be at least three reasons for rejecting Eusebius' view of the cause of the first war. It was accordingly rejected, and scholars sought other explanations.

The next decade, however, saw two discoveries of the first importance. In 1951 it was learned that the *London Papyrus* 878 contained part of a copy of the document quoted by Eusebius as Constantine's letter of 324 to the eastern provincials. The letter was shown to be authentic, and Eusebius' quotation to be correct⁽³⁵⁾. On the question of the trustworthiness of the Constantinian documents as provided by Eusebius, Baynes' stock went up and Grégoire's went down⁽³⁶⁾. Then, in 1953 Patrick Bruun showed that the War of Cibalae had to be dated to 316/17⁽³⁷⁾. His argument did not make much of an impression when it first appeared, but in 1958 it was reinforced by Christian Habicht⁽³⁸⁾, and was accepted⁽³⁹⁾. The sharp increase in Eusebius'

(31) For a convenient and brief account of the arguments of Henri Grégoire, see H. CHADWICK's preface to the London 1972 reprint of N. H. BAYNES' *Constantine the Great and the Decennalia* in *VC*, pp. iv-vi.

(32) The account of the *decennalia* is in *VC*, I.48.

(33) A *Chronologia Codicis Theodosiani* is to be found in his (posthumously published) edition of the *CTh*.

(34) L. S. LENAÏN DE TILLEMONT, *Histoire des Empereurs*, Paris, 1700, vol. IV, pp. 644f.

(35) JONES, *art. cit.* (in note 2 above), p. 196, note 1.

(36) Note 30 above.

(37) *The Constantinian Coinage of Arelate*, in *Finska Fornminnesföreningens Tidskrift*, 52.2 (Helsinki, 1953), pp. 15ff. and 49.

(38) *Zur Geschichte des Kaisers Konstantin*, in *Hermes*, 86 (1958), pp. 360-378.

(39) The acceptance is not universal, but see now Thomas GRÜNEWALD,

credit and the re-dating of the war might have had considerable effects on our view of the cause of the war. First, he was right in placing the war after the *decennalia* in 315. Second, there was now a three-year period between Licinius' war with Maximinus in 313 and the War of Cibalae; that was enough time for serious disagreement about religious policy to develop. Third, the period between the two wars with Licinius was now seen to be six or seven years rather than ten, and the first war could no longer seem to be much earlier than Licinius' openly anti-Christian activities. Fourth, it was now clear that with regard to the reason for the war Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, whose earlier editions were produced before the war, could not be used against the *VC*. In these circumstances a reconsideration of the cause of the war was in order.

None occurred. From accounts in Eusebius and in the *Origo* it appears that in 315 Constantine asked Licinius to allow that Constantine's brother-in-law Bassianus be made Caesar in charge of Italy, that Licinius had Senecio, Bassianus' brother, persuade Bassianus to murder Constantine, and that Bassianus was apprehended in the attempt and killed. Habicht saw that this affair, which appears in the *VC* as a secondary cause of the war, and in the *Origo* as the cause of the war⁽⁴⁰⁾, did in fact antedate the war. Without discussing the difference between the sources he pronounced that affair the cause⁽⁴¹⁾. Barnes agreed, again without discussion⁽⁴²⁾. Desire for power was assumed to be the motive. I think that such a conclusion is hasty. There is a split here between a pagan source and a Christian one, and the fact that Eusebius makes no effort to conceal the affair is an indication that his view that it was a secondary cause should not be passed over.

Scholars who point to the Bassianus affair would not necessarily intend to rule out religious antagonism as a contributory cause.

Constantinus Maximus Augustus: Herrschaftspropaganda in der zeitgenössischen Überlieferung (*Historia Einzelschriften* 54) (Stuttgart, 1990), 109-112.

(40) Cf. EUSEBIUS, *HE*, 10.8.5 and *VC*, I.50.2, and *Origo* (= *Anonymus Valesii*), 15; BARNES, *CE*, p. 66; the edition of the *Origo* by I. KÖNIG, Trier 1987, pp. 113-118.

(41) *Art. cit.*, p. 375.

(42) *CE*, pp. 66-68.

However, unless religious antagonism is specifically included, Constantine's explanation of his career is implicitly rejected. If that step is to be taken, it should be taken deliberately. An argument for rejecting Eusebius' evidence regarding religious antagonism as a cause would have to run, I think, roughly as follows. "Eusebius says that both wars were fought for religious reasons, but his examples of Licinius' persecuting activities all seem to date to the inter-war period. Therefore he is wrong about the reason for the first war." Such an argument has two faults. First, it assumes that in order for the first war to have been fought for religious reasons there had to be persecution. In fact there had only to be disagreement. Second, it does not follow from Eusebius' own lack of evidence supporting his view that his view was wrong. All the evidence regarding the war should be considered, and to that task we may now proceed.

In the *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (of 1948) A. H. M. Jones argued that Licinius' constitution of June 15, 313 (commonly known as the Edict of Milan), represented an attempt, by stressing imperial religious neutrality, to withdraw from the more pro-Christian position of Constantine's letter to Maximinus late in 312. This argument was later supported by Nesselhauf, but does not seem to have made much of an impression on others⁽⁴³⁾. To me it seems quite correct. I think that Jones would have made more of his argument if he had not so seriously overrated the value of the coins as indicators of the emperors' personal religious beliefs. His idea is the more important because it deals with such early documents — ten years earlier than the time when Constantine began to say publicly that his whole career had been a christianizing mission.

It was argued by A. A. T. Ehrhardt, and then independently by Barnes, that *CTh* 9.5.1 (= *FIRA*², 1.94) of January 1, 314, which prescribes crucifixion as a punishment for slaves who

(43) JONES, pp. 76-80. For Constantine's letter cf. LACTANTIUS, *DMP*, 44, 11; EUSEBIUS, *HE*, 9.9.12; N. H. BAYNES, *Two Notes on the Great Persecution*, in *CQ*, 18 (1924), pp. 193-194. For Licinius' constitution cf. LACTANTIUS, *DMP*, 48.2ff.; EUSEBIUS, *HE*, 10.5.2ff.; H. NESSELHAUF, *Der Toleranzgesetz des Licinius*, in *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 74 (1954), pp. 44-61; A. H. M. JONES, *The Later Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1964, vol. I, pp. 80-81.

inform on their masters, is a law of Licinius⁽⁴⁴⁾. I accept Barnes' argument that it never was a law of Constantine. The law is to be read with Victor, 41.2-4, which says that Constantine and Licinius fought the war *ob diversos mores*. The *mores* of Licinius referred to by Victor are crucifixion and parsimony. The first seems to me to indicate a religious factor⁽⁴⁵⁾. The second, which may seem a very odd reason for a war, would make good sense if it stemmed from disagreement over expenditures required by Constantine's restitution of property confiscated during the persecution.

In his edition of Lactantius' *De mortibus persecutorum* J. L. Creed dates the work to 314-15 and argues that it shows "subdued hostility" towards Licinius⁽⁴⁶⁾. I accept this argument, which indicates contemporary religious antagonism. In my opinion it is confirmed by the fact that at 36.1 Lactantius seems to blame Licinius for delays in attacking Maximinus.

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, 9.11, which was probably written by 315⁽⁴⁷⁾, Eusebius represented Licinius' purge of Maximinus' associates in 313 as a purge of persecutors. This was a mistake caused by his temporary belief that Licinius was a Christian, but it is of interest as showing what Eusebius thought a Christian conqueror might do.

(44) A. A. T. EHRLHARDT, *Some Aspects of Constantine's Legislation*, in *Studia Patristica*, 2, *Texte und Untersuchungen*, 64 (Berlin, 1957), pp. 114-121; T. D. BARNES, *Three Imperial Edicts*, in *ZPE*, 21 (1976), p. 276. R. MAC MULLEN objected to Barnes' argument there in his article *What Difference Did Christianity Make?*, in *Historia*, 35 (1986), p. 334. However, either the (non-imperial) consular date or the (name or) title of the addressee must be emended, and BARNES' remedy was a simple one. His argument was somewhat confirmed after his *ZPE* article. See his *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982 (hereinafter *New Empire*), pp. 127-128.

(45) Given some of the punishments prescribed by Constantine, I do not think that mere social humanitarianism would explain his ban on crucifixion [*CTh*, 9.24.1; 1.16.7; 9.18.1; 9.15.1 and 10.10.2 are discussed by R. MAC MULLEN in *What Difference Did Christianity Make?*, in *Historia*, 35.3 (1986), p. 333]. It seems to me that the pagan sources reflect neutral language of Constantine's public propaganda.

(46) Oxford, 1984, pp. xxxiii-xxxv.

(47) Above, note 27.

In his letter of December 8, 316 to the bishop Protogenes (of Serdica, apparently) ⁽⁴⁸⁾ Constantine extended to the territories being won in the war of Cibalae his earliest law recognizing the validity of manumissions performed in church ⁽⁴⁹⁾. The war had been going on for two months, and was to continue for four more. Constantine's very prompt attention to this matter indicates that it was important to him.

Between 324 and 330 the pagan historian Praxagoras of Athens wrote in two books a laudatory history of Constantine which was briefly summarized by Photius ⁽⁵⁰⁾. Praxagoras gave the cause of the war as follows. "When Constantine learned that Licinius was treating his subjects in a cruel and inhuman manner, he would not tolerate his kinsman's unbearable ὕβρις, and made war upon him in order to change (μετασχησόμενος) him from a tyrant into a kingly ruler" (my translation). The mentions here of cruelty and arrogance do not contradict what Victor says about cruelty and parsimony. The point is clearly made that Licinius would not do as Constantine wished, and so Constantine fought in order to change him. It would not be useful to argue from the absence here of any mention of religious conflict, because there was nothing in Praxagoras about such a conflict before the second war either. The cause of that, according to him, was that Licinius broke his oaths and went in for all kinds of wickedness.

That the quarrel was over policy rather than personal is further confirmed by fig. 15 of Petrus Patricius ⁽⁵¹⁾, which quotes a reply by Constantine to Licinius' envoy in 317. I think that Constantine's meaning may be rendered as follows. "I repudiated my own brother-in-law as a colleague because of his offences. I have not come campaigning from the Ocean all the way to this place just to receive a slave along with him into the imperial college. Tell him to forget about Valens." A second important point about this fragment is the mention of the Ocean, which is a long way

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Cf. F. MILLAR, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, Ithaca, 1977, p. 591, and BARNES, *New Empire*, p. 73, note 116.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ *CJ*, 1.13.1.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ JACOBY, 219T.

⁽⁵¹⁾ This is in MÜLLER, *FHG*, vol. IV, pp. 189-190. Cf. *Origo*, 17 (= *Excerpta Valesiana* or *Anonymus Valesii*).

from any possible starting-point for this campaign ⁽⁵²⁾. Constantine seems to be thinking here of the mission which he mentions in the letters quoted by Eusebius in *VC* 2.28 and 4.9 — the christianizing mission which, he says, began at the Western Ocean. It is worth noting that the remarks quoted in the fragment, which Petrus describes as being delivered by a man almost choked with rage, antedate by more than seven years the public statements of Constantine.

It seems that most scholars dismiss Praxagoras' statements about this war as Constantinian propaganda, on the view that Constantine did not get what he wanted out of the war. Moreau ⁽⁵³⁾ and Habicht ⁽⁵⁴⁾ have argued that Constantine wanted the two wars against Licinius conflated in order to obscure failure in the first. Barnes has asserted ⁽⁵⁵⁾ that Licinius and his Caesar Valens managed to force Constantine to genuine negotiations by breaking his lines of communication.

These views are not convincing. Propaganda is not necessarily false. Constantine won both wars. He should have been happy to claim that he had defeated his reprehensible brother-in-law, given him another chance, and fought him again only when he proved incorrigible. There really is no motive for the false propaganda effort alleged by Moreau ⁽⁵⁶⁾. As for the military situation in 317, Jones took the view that each side had cut the other's communications ⁽⁵⁷⁾. I think that it would be more accurate to say that each was in a position to threaten the other's communications. In any case, the result of those negotiations does not suggest that Constantine was in much danger. Licinius

⁽⁵²⁾ It might have been considered to have started from Arles or Verona. Cf. BARNES, *New Empire*, p. 73.

⁽⁵³⁾ J. MOREAU, *Zum Problem der Vita Constantini*, in *Historia*, 4 (1955), pp. 237-242.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ *Art. cit.*, p. 375.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ *CE*, p. 51.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ The logic of Moreau's argument is peculiar, for if Constantine had failed in a non-religious war of Cibalae and succeeded in the crusade of 324 he should have stressed the differences of motives and results on the two occasions. Constantine did not claim that he personally was invincible; he always said that God gave him victory.

⁽⁵⁷⁾ A. H. M. JONES, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, p. 110.

obeyed his order to kill Valens, he gave up Europe as far as Thrace, and he accepted dynastic arrangements providing for the eventual takeover of the empire by the Constantinian house. Constantine made good his claim to legislate for the whole empire⁽⁵⁸⁾. If Licinius was as effective a general as Barnes describes him, he was not much of a negotiator. It seems clear enough that he had been forced to the obedience which Praxagoras said Constantine had fought to obtain.

The *Origo* (5.18) confirms the statement of Praxagoras in the description of the negotiations which ended the War of Cibacae — *missus deinde Mestrianus legatus pacem petit, Licinio postulante et pollicente se imperata facturum*. Licinius had earlier been receiving orders which he had not carried out.

The statements in the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, 41.8-10 about Licinius' rusticity, avarice, distrust of education and hatred of forensic activity are not inconsistent with opposition to christianizing innovation or to legislation in the Christian interest. Like the statements in Victor, they go back to the propaganda of the period.

Propaganda against Licinius did not have to refer to religious differences. In 316 it could have been "Licinius is cruel and stingy, refuses to co-operate with the senior Augustus, has plotted against him and is now planning an attack". In 324 "Licinius is a troublemaker who has presumed too much on his kinsman's indulgence. He has now broken his oaths and started a civil war". These are the terms which Constantine, who was not suicidal, would have used in public, and some of the pagans never went beyond them⁽⁵⁹⁾. The neutrality of these terms as regards religion does not, however, weigh against the view that the war was fought for religious reasons, and the sources, both pagan and Christian, which provide evidence of the controversy are not to be disregarded.

It would, indeed, be surprising if Licinius had never displayed irritation. He had been made an Augustus by Galerius in 308, the year after Constantine had assumed that title, when his old

(58) Cf. HABICHT, *art. cit.*, pp. 366-370.

(59) T. G. ELLIOTT, *The Language of Constantine's Propaganda*, in *TAPA*, 120 (1990), pp. 349-353.

friend was happily persecuting Christians and had not yet become ill. When the wars with Maxentius and Maximinus were over Licinius was faced with a senior Augustus (that position confirmed by the pagan senate of Rome) who expected him, now married to a Christian, to execute a revolutionary policy on behalf of the new religion, of which he was not, and would not be, an adherent. About seven years Constantine's senior, the choice of Galerius, confident in his own abilities and policies, Licinius wanted a way out. But there was none. If he acquiesced in the new policy he would be despised by the pagans, and become the sick man of the East. If he wanted to stop Constantine, how was he to go about it? Eusebius says "first deviously, then openly"⁽⁶⁰⁾. That is not at all implausible. Eusebius' implication that he had not conspicuous anti-Christian activity of Licinius to record during the years immediately after 313 allows for the possibility that Licinius was not so much doing things which Constantine did not want done as refusing to do things which Constantine did want done.

Constantine's laws concerning crucifixion, and manumissions in church, have already been mentioned. To those may be added the laws about bishops' courts⁽⁶¹⁾ and about tax exemptions for clerics⁽⁶²⁾. Licinius would not have approved.

The Bassianus affair is not a difficulty for the present argument. Licinius had shown that he would not be Constantine's assistant. His remaining choices were to allow his house to be phased out of the imperial college, or to resist Constantine. He presumably persuaded Bassianus that he (Bassianus) would one day be discarded too. It is easy for some, but not necessary for all, to see Constantine as acting in bad faith at this juncture. To the present writer it seems more probable that he was determined to make his junior colleague either obey or agree to be phased out.

Eusebius' conflations of the two wars has caused difficulty, but the problem should not be exaggerated. His declared purpose

(60) *VC*, 1.50; 2.1.

(61) Cf. BARNES, *CE*, p. 51.

(62) These are *CTh*, 16.23.1-7, and others, for which T. G. ELLIOTT, *The Tax Exemptions Granted to Clerics by Constantine and Constantius II*, in *Phoenix*, 32 (1978), pp. 326-336.

in the *Life* was not to write all of Constantine's wars and laws, but to illustrate his religious character⁽⁶³⁾. Since two crusades could not prove more than one, his conflation of the wars is not of itself suspicious.

Thus, I see no reason to reject either pagan or Christian assertions about this war. In all probability Constantine did criticize Licinius' *mores*, and did fight in order to change him. The change desired, however, was a change into an instrument of his own christianizing policy. That the disagreement was over policy is confirmed by Constantine's insistence on his power to legislate for the whole empire, and the sequel to the war indicates that the policy in question was the religious one.

IV

Regarding the cause of the second war against Licinius there is much more agreement, because the evidence of Eusebius presents far less difficulty. In *VC*, 1.48ff. (where he confuses it with the war of 316/7) and 2.1ff. he represents the war of 324 as a crusade against a persecutor. Like most scholars I accept that presentation. However, I think it important to note that the official reason for the war was probably not, in 324, the crusading one. In 324 Constantine could accuse Licinius of having violated their agreement of 317, and the statement of Praxagoras discussed above indicates that he did so.

C.

It appears, then, that Constantine's explanation of his career is in accord with the facts and has support in sources other than Eusebius. Nevertheless, it would not be unreasonable to ask why the tradition of a religious reason for the wars of 312 and 316/17 is not even stronger. I think that the ignorance of Eusebius regarding Constantine in 312⁽⁶⁴⁾ is an important reason for the situation; I would offer two others.

(63) *VC*, 1.11. Acknowledgement of Eusebius' warning to his reader does not require us to praise the scope of his work.

(64) ELLIOTT, *Conversion*.

In his letter of 324 to the people of the Eastern provinces Constantine described the Great Persecution as a civil war, begun in the midst of a profound peace, by cruel and furious men⁽⁶⁵⁾. It is important to note how well it suited Constantine to regard the persecution as a civil war. This contention brought his christianizing mission under the umbrella of an emperor's traditional duties. He could claim, without reference to any religious consideration, that it was any emperor's duty to stop persecution, and he may well have believed that that was the case. The distinction between a civil war fought for religious reasons and business-as-usual was thus blurred. This is why the dominant note of the pagans writing about Constantine is disillusionment. They had accepted his business-as-usual claims, and then found out after 324 (if not earlier) that there was more on his agenda. For the pagans the trouble with Constantine was not that he was unqualified for rule; it was that, having become a good emperor, he embarked on an expensive revolutionary policy which they disliked⁽⁶⁶⁾.

A third factor affecting the tradition was the need for prudence on Constantine's part. Many scholars have been impressed by the audacity of his revolution⁽⁶⁷⁾. Nevertheless, scholarly argument about him is certainly not governed by the notion that the revolution was dangerous to himself, and, in the event of failure, to all the Christians of the empire⁽⁶⁸⁾. To the present writer this seems to go back to the sanguine attitude of Eusebius, who knew of the emperor's death in happy circumstances, and who died before the troubles between Constantine's surviving sons and the pagan opposition to Constantius II.

(65) *VC*, 2.49. Cf. 2.54.

(66) For moderate fourth-century statements by pagans cf. EUTROPIUS, 10.7-8; VICTOR, 41.16-21; *Epitome de Caesaribus*, 41.16.

(67) J. B. BURY's statement (in *The Later Roman Empire*, vol. I, p. 366 in the Dover Books edition of 1958) that "Constantine's revolution was perhaps the most audacious act ever committed by an autocrat in disregard and defiance of the vast majority of his subjects" is still quoted. Cf. recently P. BROWN, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, 1982, p. 97.

(68) See, however, H. GRÉGOIRE, *L'authenticité et l'historicité de la Vita Constantini attribuée à Eusèbe de Césarée*, in *Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres*, 39 (1953), p. 466.

There was no reason why a convert from paganism should have pretended that he had always acted as a Christian. The acceptance of his claim does not require the belief that he told all of the people all of the truth all of the time, nor does it require the belief that religious reasons were his only reasons at any given point. In these circumstances I have concluded that his explanation can be accepted.

Is it the most probable explanation? There seem to me to be two other possibilities. One is the faulty Eusebian conversion story and all the conjecture arising from it. The scholar who works with it cannot find any support for Eusebius in the rest of the contemporary evidence, and must put up with the faults. The other course open is to formulate some hypothesis about early and more complex motives of Constantine. The difficulty here is that such hypotheses are bound to be less economical than Constantine's explanation. For example, if we suppose that Constantine simply wanted power at the beginning, and that he gradually came to realize that the support of Christians was necessary to him, we shall immediately be faced with the evidence of Lactantius regarding his first actions as emperor in 306. If, on the other hand, we suppose that he had already decided in 306 that for the sake of obtaining power he was going to work in the interests of Christianity, we are really accepting his explanation and adding an unsupported conjecture to it. In these circumstances Constantine's explanation, which is not necessarily the whole truth, is the economical way to account for the facts, and remains, as such, the probable explanation.

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