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CONSTANTINE AS A 'BISHOP'

By W. SESTON *

The author of the *Vita Constantini* (traditionally and persistently identified with Eusebius, despite the silence of St. Jerome), tells us that Constantine 'at a banquet he was giving to the bishops declared that he too was a bishop. He added these words which I heard with my own ears : ἄλλ' ὑμεῖς μὲν τῶν εἶσω τῆς ἐκκλησίας, ἐγὼ δὲ τῶν ἐκτὸς ὑπὸ θεοῦ καθεσταμένος ἐπίσκοπος ἂν εἶην'.¹

In attempts to define the relations between the first Christian emperor and the Church, no phrase is more frequently quoted than this *obiter dictum*. In the sixteenth century the French scholar Henri de Valois rendered τῶν ἐκτὸς as if it were the genitive of τὰ ἐκτὸς,² and since then it has been the practice to regard Constantine as an 'évêque du dehors' : the Emperor either exercised episcopal functions though not consecrated, or supervised mundane affairs (that is, the State), after the fashion of a bishop, or else held from God a temporal commission for ecclesiastical government, the bishops retaining control of dogma, ethics and discipline. Each of these three distinct interpretations is equally admissible.

None the less, it is just as likely that Constantine was 'bishop of those outside the Church', οἱ ἐκτὸς. That was the opinion of Lenain de Tillemont.³ It had almost been lost sight of when, in 1909, E.-Ch. Babut demonstrated that τῶν ἐκτὸς in that sense comes straight from St. Paul, and so can hardly fail to have been present to the mind of a Christian writer.⁴ And, indeed, the context of the formula in the *Vita* shows that the author was thinking only of the pagans. After mentioning that Constantine forbade sacrifices and decreed Sunday observance, he continues, 'and so it was fitting that, at a banquet he was giving to the bishops, he decreed that he too was a bishop. He added these words which I heard with my own ears : "you are bishops of those within the Church, but I have been appointed by God bishop of those outside." His policy was shaped in accordance with this statement : he exercised an episcopate over all his subjects, and, so far as in him lay, encouraged them to lead the religious life.' Then follow further observations about the interdict on sacrifices, divination, and gladiatorial contests, and the disbanding of the eunuch priests in charge of the ritual for promoting the rise of the Nile.

Most historians nowadays have adopted Babut's interpretation.⁵ It must, however, be noted that St. Paul in using the phrase had in view not only idolaters but also any categories of sinners who might for the time being have been excluded from the communion of the faithful. That is presumably why Baynes reckons heretics along with pagans among 'those who are outside the Church'.⁶

In the interpretation of this passage of the *Vita*, Baynes is certainly right. It is no less certain that in other passages of the *Vita*, 'those that are outside' designate persons other than pagans. Thus the author distinguishes between donations to members of the Church and benefactions to outsiders.⁷ Again, Constantine proclaims that he is writing two letters, τὸ μὲν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ δε τοῖς ἐκτὸς κατὰ πόλιν δήμοις.⁸

* The writer is indebted to Mr. R. Syme for the translation.

¹ *Vita Const.* vi, 24 = Heikel, p. 126, 9 (I. A. Heikel, *Eusebius Werke* 1, Leipzig, 1902, cited below as Heikel).

² Migne, *PG* xx, 1171 : 'vos quidem, inquit, in iis quae intra Ecclesiam episcopi estis, ego vero in iis quae extra geruntur a Deo sum constitutus.'

³ *Histoire des Empereurs* iv, 293.

⁴ In *Revue critique d'hist. et de litt.* NS 68 (1909), 362-4, adducing 1 Cor. 5, 13 ; Col. 4, 5 ; 1 Thess. 4, 12.

⁵ For example, J. R. Palanque in Fliche et Martin, *Histoire de l'Eglise* III (1936), 63, and, quite recently, A. Piganiol in Glotz, *Hist. romaine* iv : *L'Empire Chrétien* (1946), 137. H. Lietzmann, on the other hand, sticks to the interpretation first given by Henri de Valois, *Hist. de l'Eglise Ancienne* III (1941), 157.

⁶ 'Constantine the Great and the Christian Church,' *Proceedings of the British Academy* xv (1931), 90 f.

⁷ *Vita* II, 22 = Heikel, p. 50, 8.

⁸ *Vita* II, 23 = Heikel, p. 50, 23.

The author of the *Vita* is thus rather shaky in his definition of οἱ ἐκτός.⁹ Let us not fancy that 'bishop of those outside' is a rendering in ecclesiastical terminology of the pagan title 'pontifex maximus'. As such, to be sure, Constantine had to see that the traditional polytheism perpetuated its legal existence at any rate. But if that were the meaning of the phrase attributed to him, we should have to assume that he was intimating to the bishops that the pagan world was his affair exclusively, that the Church had no right to ask the Emperor to employ persecution and violence. However, the author of the *Vita* is certainly not thinking of this tolerant dispensation, for he inserts Constantine's remark in the context of a series of extremely rigorous enactments against paganism. His point is not a *modus vivendi* guaranteed by the Emperor, but the abolition of paganism.

Another passage, which has hitherto escaped notice, shows Constantine, while still appointed by God, ἐκ θεοῦ καθεσταμένος, not 'bishop of those outside the Church', but well and truly a bishop of the Church.¹⁰ Mentioning his benefactions to those outside, the *Vita* proceeds: 'such was his attitude in general towards all men. But he had especial care for the Church of God. Disturbances having occurred in various countries, he acted like a universal bishop appointed by God (οἷα τις κοινὸς ἐπίσκοπος ἐκ θεοῦ καθεσταμένος), and he summoned councils of the ministers of God. He did not disdain to appear at their meetings and sit down beside them, taking cognizance of the subjects for discussion, imparting to all the benefits of the peace of God. He sat in the middle of them, as one among many; without armed men or soldiers, without guards of any kind, he wore the fear of God as a garment, and the most devoted of his faithful colleagues were a rampart about him. Those whom he saw inclined to follow the greater number and disposed to agreement and harmony he treated with great consideration, and he was happy at the unanimity. As for those who refused to be persuaded, he kept them at a distance.'

The text deserves analysis. The authority of Constantine, the 'universal bishop' of the Church, is not limited to the confines of a city but ranges over all the Empire. There can arise no clash of powers between him and the rest of the bishops because the Emperor has a sphere of his own, the external affairs of the Church. He supports the Church with the authority of the State wherever it is necessary; he summons and organizes councils, he sees that their decisions are carried out. Such is his role. Constantine does not decide the questions that come before the bishops—he is not above them, but merely one of them. He follows the discussion, and all he does is to establish what side the majority is on, and in the favour shown to the orthodox (the majority) and in the distinct hostility towards the dissentient (the minority) should, I think, be discerned the action of the State intervening to help and protect the one, whereas the others are put under the control of the civil authorities and sometimes sent into exile. In fact, the text adumbrates a theory of the 'secular arm'.

The common features in the two definitions of Constantine's role as bishop are to be noted. The author of the *Vita* is evidently anxious to keep the Emperor outside the main stream of the Church's life. Acknowledging Constantine's function as a secular arm, he allocates him a precise but limited sphere of action, he makes him a technician. On the other hand, by presenting Constantine with the title of 'bishop', he brings his activity inside a definite and familiar ambit. The Emperor's mandate in the Church does not differ in kind from the mandate the bishops have received; it is in no way superior. Thus Constantine at Nicaea is not placed over the Church by right divine, as it were—he is, and possibly through God's will, *primus inter pares*. Finally, whether he is 'bishop of those

⁹ On the other hand one will notice that there is not, it is true, any ambiguity in the phrase τῶν ἔξω τις in the letter of the synod of the Egyptian bishops in Athanasius, *Apol. contra Arianos* 3, to which Baynes (o.c. 91) draws attention. Similarly Julian, when writing to a provincial high-priest and using the phrase ἀρχαίς γὰρ τῶν ἑνδον, indubitably contrasts pagans and Christians (of whatever brand); cf. *Epp.* 84a, cited by A. Piganiol, o.c., 137. The view of E. Caspar (*Gesch. des Papsttums* 1, 117)

is that in the passage of the *Vita Constantini* under discussion the contrast lies not between Christians and pagans, but between Church and State: ἐπίσκοπος τῶν ἐκτός ought to be rendered 'Bischof für die äusseren Angelegenheiten'. In support of his translation he might have cited *Vita* IV, 1, and III, 12, where secular affairs are, in fact, τὰ ἐκτός or τὰ ἑξωθεν.

¹⁰ *Vita* I, 44 = Heikel, p. 28, 17 ff.

outside the Church' or the 'universal bishop', the peer in dignity of the bishops sitting together in councils, Constantine seems to know only one type of action—the use of force in the service of the Church.

This is the conception of the Emperor and of the Emperor's relation to the bishops that Athanasius felt impelled to state in 338, shortly after the death of Constantine—that is to say, about the time when Eusebius of Caesarea composed the *Vita Constantini*, as is generally believed. Athanasius blames his opponents, the party of Eusebius, for submitting questions of dogma and discipline to the judgment of the Emperor and of the State. 'Because of the Arian ungodliness,' he writes, 'they make war on the Church when they attack Athanasius and the other (orthodox) bishops. Who in truth is responsible for the deaths and the exiles? Are not they? Who uses the external power—ταῖς ἑξωθεν προστασίαις χρώμενος—in order to attack the bishops? Is it not the party of Eusebius rather than he whom they blame, Athanasius?'¹¹ As E. Caspar perceived, Athanasius employs these carefully chosen words to claim autonomy for the Church in the face of the Emperors whom the Arians ask to intervene in the internal affairs of that Church.¹²

Much later, in 368, St. Ambrose employs the same terms. He rebukes the Arians for having granted to the Emperor the right of legislating on behalf of the Church—'isti imperatori volunt dare ius ecclesiae.'¹³ The view of Ambrose is that, though it is the Emperor's duty to aid the Church in the convocation and conduct of councils, as in the carrying out of the sentences of those councils, all that he ought to do is to ratify what the bishops decide.¹⁴ The Arian Philostorgius, narrating how the Council of Nicaea came to define orthodoxy, assigns to Constantine the same role as that evident in the passage in the *Vita*. Athanasius and Ambrose would have accepted it—'when the appointed day arrived and the bishops came to express their several opinions, the Emperor was in their midst and he waited to see what the assembly would decide'.¹⁵

The orthodox party thus claimed a right to define with precision the Emperor's province in Church matters. Very different was the opinion of Eusebius of Caesarea. In the speech which he wrote for the *Tricennalia* of Constantine may be discerned, as Baynes has shown in a clear and convincing fashion,¹⁶ the earliest manifesto of the political philosophy of the Christian Empire—to the Emperor belongs an authority from God over all things, including the Church. On earth he is the interpreter and ally of the divine *logos*. His will puts into effect the very will of God the Father. The bishops ought not to think of circumscribing those operations or diminishing their potency by making them like the operations of other men. And so Eusebius never compares Constantine to a bishop. To be sure, the mission of the Emperor, like the mission of the bishops, is the *θεραπεία τοῦ θεοῦ*, but the Emperor's mission is on a different plane.¹⁷ He has inherited it from Hellenistic theories about monarchical authority, as is adequately proved by the texts which Baynes adduced at many places in the *Vita*. Not the Church itself but this external tradition showed Constantine how to behave towards the pagans. Indeed, just as in those theories the Logos utilizes the King to rescue men from wrong-doing, so the Christian Emperor, imitating his Saviour and having no thought but the salvation of men, saves the pagans themselves by teaching them religion.¹⁸ Political preoccupations as such are absent—the Emperor's mission to the pagans is purely spiritual and religious. For all men (and consequently for heretics as well) the Emperor is the guide who points out the path that leads through edification to salvation¹⁹—the word *διδασκαλία* provides the best definition of the Emperor's duty, as very frequently in this work of Eusebius.²⁰ The issue therefore is this—constraint is not to be put on pagans, forbidding their rites and mysteries, shutting

¹¹ *Apol. contra Arianos* 3.

¹² *Op. cit.*, 142.

¹³ *Contra Auxentium* 31.

¹⁴ Cf. *Epp.* 12, 6; 21, 15, and the texts quoted and analysed by J. R. Palanque, *S. Ambroise et l'Empire Romain* (1933), 373 ff.

¹⁵ Philostorgius 1, 9a = Bidez, p. 9.

¹⁶ 'Eusebius and the Christian Empire,' *Mélanges Bidez* I (1934), 14 ff.

¹⁷ *Tricenn.* XI = Heikel, p. 224, 2; 225, 13.

¹⁸ *Tricenn.* VII = Heikel, p. 215, 23 f.

¹⁹ *Tricenn.* II = Heikel, p. 199, 16; IX = Heikel, p. 224, 26 f.

²⁰ Cf. especially *Tricenn.* XI = Heikel, p. 224, 26 f.

the temples : they will be won for the True God by the persuasive power of example, by the teaching of religious doctrine and observances.²¹

It must be admitted that such was the behaviour of Constantine, according to the speeches and letters preserved by the *Vita*. In his inaugural address at the Council of Nicaea Constantine proclaims that he is participating, along with the bishops, in the service of God ;²² he did not disdain to be the actual president of the Council,²³ and bring pressure to bear on the waverers.²⁴ Both his letter to Eusebius and Theogenius and his letter to the bishops at the Council of Tyre are filled to overflowing with a missionary zeal in complete harmony with the mission assigned to the Emperor by Eusebius in his *Tricennalia* speech.²⁵ The technique is identical—no violence—and so is the field of its operation—the whole world, including the Barbarians. Since the same preoccupations are at the back of the letter to Sapor, one should follow Baynes and accept the authenticity of that document.²⁶

Thus, in making Constantine 'bishop of those outside', the author of the *Vita Constantini* speaks a different language from the Eusebius of the *Tricennalia* speech ; and what we know of Constantine's attitude gives him the lie. The reason, I believe, is this—both the theology of Eusebius, where it touches on politics, and the policy of Constantine subsequent to A.D. 327 have an Arian flavour that our author found wholly unpalatable. Hence his contradictions and exaggerations. Though he accepts the orthodox theory of the perfect autonomy of the Church, he composes a narration of the Council of Nicaea in which the Emperor imposes his sovereign will on the bishops.²⁷ On the other hand, as, according to the orthodox theory, the principal function of the Emperor was to carry out the decisions of the bishops, he turns Constantine into a minister of vengeance who can only punish and persecute, not redeem like the Eusebian Emperor.

To make his portrait plausible, he does not hesitate to distort the facts. This can easily be seen from a brief examination of Constantine's anti-pagan legislation as summed up in the *Vita*.²⁸ According to our author, Constantine absolutely forbade sacrifices, the practice of magic and gladiatorial contests ; and he disbanded the eunuch priests who worshipped the Nile in order to maintain the fertility of Egypt. It is true that as early as 318 Constantine forbade blood sacrifices²⁹—but these were only domestic sacrifices. He laid an interdict upon magic, but only in its mildest form, charms for health or love.³⁰ He refused to *haruspices* the entry of private houses, but in the same rescript he allowed traditional rites none the less to be celebrated in temples and at public altars.³¹ It cannot be denied that he condemned the very principle of gladiatorial contests,³² but it is not at all likely that he persecuted the priests of the Sarapeum at Memphis or abolished the annual ritual of the Nile ; for Libanius (c. 385–390) uses the continuance of these ceremonies in the course of the fourth century as an argument against the enemies of paganism.³³

²¹ In c. ix (= Heikel, p. 219 f.), Eusebius furnishes an instance of the method followed in a restricted field, namely the Palace.

²² *Vita* II, 69 = Heikel, p. 68, 27 ; and III, 12 = Heikel, p. 83, 11.

²³ Cf. Baynes, 'Constantine the Great and the Christian Church' 87 (see note 6).

²⁴ Cf. Philostorgius I, 9a = Bidez, p. 9.

²⁵ Athanasius, *Apol. contra Arianos* 86 = PG XXV, 404.

²⁶ o.c., 27. But I hold for a forgery the letter 'Επιγνωτε νῦν (*Vita* III, 64 f. = Heikel, p. 111, 14 ff.), since, after a passage of sheer rhetoric, it contains a ban upon heretical conventicles and confiscation of their property : *contra*, P. Batiffol, 'Les documents de la *Vita Constantini*,' *Bull. de l'ancienne litt. et d'arch. chrét.*, 1914, 87 ; N. H. Baynes, o.c., 25.

²⁷ *Vita* III, 13 = Heikel, p. 83, 14.

²⁸ *Vita* IV, 22 and 25 = Heikel, p. 126, 2 and 14.

²⁹ *Cod. Theod.* xv, 1, 2.

³⁰ *Ib.*, ix, 16, 3.

³¹ *Ib.*, ix, 16, 2.

³² *Ib.*, xv, 12, 1.

³³ *Pro templis* 35 = Foerster III, p. 105, 13 :

'Not only at Rome have sacrifices been maintained. They are also in the great and populous city of Sarapis. . . . As for the Nile, it is the banquets that cause it to flood the countryside, and if they were not offered to the Nile on the right occasion and by the proper officiants, the river would refuse to fertilize the fields. Well did they know it, so I fancied, they who would have wished to suppress these festivals also, but did not do so, and permitted the river to be worshipped according to the ancient observances so as to get the benefit of his annual increment. . . . I should like to ask them (i.e., those who want to destroy the temples), would they dare to march before the tribunal and propose to put a stop to the worship rendered to the Nile?' It was in A.D. 391 that the Sarapeum of Memphis was demolished ; cf. O. Seeck, *Gesch. des Untergangs der antiken Welt* v², 527 f. and 534 f. What the author of the *Vita* (iv, 16 = Heikel, p. 123, 26 ff.) says of the imperial cult betrays the same sort of distorting exaggeration. He asserts that Constantine officially forbade statues being set up in his honour. But we have the Hispellum document to prove the contrary, *ILS* 705. And Socrates, as long ago as the fifth century, knew the truth (*Hist. eccl.* I, 18).

Our author sets forth the anti-pagan legislation of Constantine in a most arbitrary fashion. Only one fact is accurately stated, two are distorted, the fourth is suspect. A contemporary of Constantine would easily have set things right—but then the work would not have succeeded as propaganda. Is it likely that Eusebius would have dared to compose this tendentious account at the very moment when his *Tricennalia* speech had so extolled the divine glory of Constantine? The Church as he conceived it follows the guidance of an Emperor who imitates the Logos, an Emperor whom God has marked out to bear the gospel throughout the whole earth. Was it possible for Eusebius at the same time to think of a different Church, independent of the State, ferociously hostile to whoever did not accept the credo, recognizing no power but only the bishops, and assimilating the Emperor to the bishops only in order to subjugate him to the service of the Church?

To conclude, the theory of the ' bishop of those outside ' does not come from Eusebius of Caesarea. But that does not mean that the *Vita Constantini* in which it occurs must have been composed towards the end of the fourth century. As we have seen, as early as 338 the orthodox party maintained the same conception of the Church as that found in the *Vita*. Moreover, as our conclusion bears only upon one passage in the *Vita*, it would be premature to use it as an argument for denying the Eusebian authorship of the work as a whole. The apologia is a thing of scraps and tatters; unity of construction is far from being its shining virtue.