Constantine the Great: Unity and Ambiguity

States ruled by ecclesiastical authorities are entities vastly different than all others, and "only a rash and presumptuous man would take it on himself to discuss them."[1] However, one may not simply ignore Constantine the Great, the former emperor of Rome who is considered to be one of the most influential men in history in regard to the relationship between church and state. His policies have been a topic of conversation and debate among politicians, historians, and theologians for nearly seventeen centuries. Some have hailed him the greatest leader and protector Christendom has ever known while others have characterized him as "a supremely political animal" at best.[2] Though ancient sources are inadequate or biased at times, the reign of Constantine the Great in the fourth century, specifically regarding the interrelation of church and state, may be described as one seeking an uncompromised unity above and at the cost of all else.

Before addressing Constantine himself, a look at the relationship between church and state contemporary to him is in order. "The relation of church and state before…Constantine was simple enough; the church was a voluntary society of intractable persons to whom it was sound policy for the state to be hostile."[3] Though some Roman emperors recognized the tenacity and cohesiveness of the Christians as admirable characteristics, the common belief among them remained that the "Christian faith and Roman tradition were antithetical."[4] This pervading belief among the leaders and people of Rome most heavily influenced the persecution of Christians throughout the empire in the first three centuries of their existence.

Christians had always been perceived by the emperors as somewhat of a threat to the empire and had been persecuted in one form or another until the reign of Constantine, but "there

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[1] Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 1961), 74.
[2] H.A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 15).
[3] Kenneth M. Setton, *Christian Attitude towards the Emperor in the Fourth Century* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 41.

is no doubt that the persecutions of Diocletian and Galerius…were more determined than any of those that had been attempted before."[5] Diocletian and Galerius successively ruled Rome from 284 to 311 and capitalized on the common belief of the people that it was intellectually sound in every sphere of life to persecute Christians simply for being Christians. Thus, upon the arrival of Constantine, "it was natural…to see Constantine's triumph as a heaven-sent vindication of Christian theological claims."[6]

As with many dates in the ancient world, the date of birth of Flavius Valerius Constantinus (Constantine the Great) is heavily disputed.[7] Most historians hold to February 27 of either the year 272 or 273 as the day on which he was born in Naissus, a military city near the Danube River. His mother, Helena, was of humble origin from Bithynia in northwest Asia Minor. The original social standing of his father Flavius Constantius is unclear, but by the time his son Constantine was born, he was a high-ranking officer in the Roman army. By 293, he had risen above the title of governor of Dalmatia to entering the imperial college as a Caesar under Augustus Maximian. Therefore, at the age of twenty or twenty-one, his son Constantine became eligible for a future appointment as emperor and soon moved to the court of Diocletian where he resided "as an heir presumptive to the throne."[8]

In May of 305, Diocletian abdicated his position as Augustus leaving the imperial college comprised of two Augusti, Constantius and Galerius, and with two men left to be appointed as Caesars. Though the public expected Constantine to assume one of these positions, he and Maxentius, another promising young man in the court of Diocletian, were looked over. Less

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[4] Michael Grant, *Constantine the Great* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 129.
[5] Ibid, 128.
[6] Michael J. Hollerich, "Myth and Mystery in Eusebius's 'De Vita Constantini,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 82 (October 1989): 444.
[7] Michael Grant, 15.
[8] Timothy Barnes, 3.

than one year later, Constantine found himself at the bedside of his father, who was stationed with his troops in Britain, and witnessed his death on July 25, 306 at York.[9] Immediately, Constantine was proclaimed Caesar Augustus by the troops, an event that signified a break in Diocletian's scheme of Rome governed by an appointed tetrarchy. Galerius soon declared that he only recognized Constantine as Caesar of the lands of Britain, Gaul, and Spain, because of the unofficial nature of his appointment, and Constantine wisely accepted this pronouncement without immediately upsetting the status quo. Maxentius sought recognition from Galerius more vehemently than and opposed to Constantine, and when he could not obtain it, seized the opportunity to plot insurrection and instigate a coup in Italy; he was invested with the imperial purple by the praetorian guard and the Roman people on October 28, 306.[10] For the next six years, Constantine raised support and conquered lands in the northwestern portion of the empire in preparation for taking his place as Augustus in Rome. Though Maxentius ruled strategically for a short time, the civilian population, including Christians, clearly recognized Constantine as more sympathetic to their plight and well-being than he. As a result, by the year 312, Italy did not so much support Maxentius with active enthusiasm as they simply tolerated him.[11] With power established in the northwestern portion of the empire and support for him throughout it, Constantine gathered his troops and began marching southward toward Rome.

Maxentius knew of Constantine's advances and remained in Rome preparing for a siege rather than marching out to meet him in battle. However, the outcome of an extended siege presented far worse consequences for Rome. With that in mind, Maxentius and his army crossed the Tiber River on the Milvian Bridge to confront the army of Constantine which seemed to have

[9] Michael Grant, 27.
[10] Timothy Barnes, 29-30.
[11] Ibid, 37-39.

an unusual appearance.[12] On October 27, 312, as Constantine's army routed his own, Maxentius attempted a retreat across the bridge. The pontoons supporting it collapsed and the body of Maxentius was found in the river the following day.[13]

The strange appearance of Constantine's army resulted from orders he had given the army concerning a vision he claimed to have had. After leaving Gaul, crossing the Alps, and arriving at the outskirts of Rome, Constantine testified that Jesus Christ had appeared to him. In the vision, Christ told him, "By this conquer," referring to the sign of the cross and its new purpose as a military standard for his army.

What is of paramount importance is not so much the degree of sincerity Constantine maintained in his conversion but the impact of it and "his rule both during his lifetime and thereafter."[14] However, the validity of his conversion experience and the subsequent testimonies of it must be evaluated to a certain extent, for though some saw it as the goal towards which the history of the church and of the empire had always been moving, others declared the event concocted and Constantine as nothing more than "a shrewd politician who became aware of the advantages to be drawn from a 'conversion.'"[15] Both of these positions are grossly exaggerated and must be properly examined.

There is some evidence available for those who question the validity or very existence of Constantine's vision and conversion. After all, Constantine was particularly liable to visionary experiences.[16] Less than two years earlier, it is written that Constantine experienced a vision of Apollo at a temple in Grannum that foretold much success for him in the future. Also, Constantine continued to serve other gods and participate in pagan ceremonies throughout his

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[12] Ibid, 43.
[13] Robert Grant, *Augustus to Constantine* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970), 236.
[14] Justo Gonzalez, 113.
[15] Ibid, 120.

life, specifically consulting the oracle of Apollo on numerous occasions. He also seems to have believed the Unconquered Sun of Mithraism and the Christian God to be compatible deities, and thus, continued in his routine practices without believing himself to be betraying or abandoning the god he claimed gave him victory at the Milvian Bridge.[17]

However, much evidence also exists for those who tend to trust the testimonies of Constantine and his contemporaries in regard to his conversion experience. When Constantine placed the Chi-Rho symbol on his labarum and the gear of his army, he was preparing to assume control of Rome, the center of pagan tradition in the world. Though Christians might have held some power in the social structure and government in the East, they were vastly outnumbered in the West.[18] An attempt to suppress ancient pagan religions and traditions in favor of Christianity, a religion considered to be atheistic by many Romans, would have been met with irresistible opposition.

Aside from the question of the validity of Constantine's conversion experience, the fact remains that he defeated Maxentius and his troops in October of 312 and entered Rome as Augustus with the overwhelming support of the people. After this day, Constantine consistently thought of himself as God's chosen servant who would cause the formerly divergent destinies of paganism and Christianity to converge upon common ground.

In January of 313, Constantine met with Licinius, the new Augustus of the eastern portion of the empire who controlled all areas east of Italy, including Egypt. Together, the two emperors issued an edict of religious toleration from the city of Milan.[19] An excerpt from this imperial decree is translated:

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[16] Michael Grant, 133.
[17] Justo Gonzalez, 122.
[18] Ibid, 121.
[19] J. Marcellus Kik, 40.

> I, Constantinus Augustus and I, Licinius Augustus, came under favorable auspices to Milan, and…have resolved among the first things to ordain, those matters by which reverence and worship to the Deity might be exhibited. That is how we may grant likewise to the Christians, and to all, the free choice to follow that mode of worship which they may wish…Therefore, we have decreed that the following ordinance, as our will, with a salutary and most correct intention, that no freedom at all shall be refused to Christians, to follow or to keep their observance or worship. But that to each one power be granted to devote his mind to that worship which he may think adapted to himself. That the Deity may in all things exhibit to us his accustomed favour and kindness."[20]

Apparently, the edict sought not to dishonor any religion, especially Christianity, and to ensure divine favor for the state in any and every way possible.

The following two years were riddled with civil war in the Roman Empire as both Constantine and Licinius sought to be in absolute control of it. After a short period of relative peace, Constantine invaded Licinius' territory in 322, and a second civil war lasting two years began.[21] According to a papyrus which shows Licinius as emperor on September 2, 324 but not on July 24, 325, one can state that Constantine had emerged as the sole master of the Roman world after much battle by July of 325.[22] According to one Christian writer contemporary to both emperors, "that nefarious tyrant [Licinius] with all his counselors and adherents, [God] cast prostrate at the feet of Constantine.[23] However, the church and empire that Constantine inherited were not the unified bodies he had hoped for. Thus, as he began his thirteen years of independent rule, Constantine constantly kept in mind the "folly of enforced unity," something he had already experienced directly with the Donatists.[24]

For the most part, the Donatists were largely located in North Africa, an impassioned and zealous area where members of fanatical faiths had long resided. The Donatist movement was

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[20] Eusebius Pamphilus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. <Christian Frederick Cruse> (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958). 426-427.
[21] Justo Gonzalez, 117.
[22] Robert Grant, 239.
[23] Eusebius Pamphilus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 437.
[24] Robert Grant, 239.

made significant by the persecution of Christians enacted by Diocletian and his court in the year 305.[25] The movement centered on whether bishops who had compromised any part of their faith during the time of persecution or those who had received their power or baptism from such a bishop should be allowed to continue as church leaders. Many Christians believed that those who had been appointed as bishops by those who compromised should be allowed to continue as leaders since their appointment had ultimately come from God. Conversely, those who became known as the Donatists strictly refused to recognize such leaders, thus causing breaches in the national unity that Constantine sought.

Two precedent-setting events related to this movement occurred in the years between 311 and 316. The first occurred between 311 and 313 when "the Donatists themselves *appealed* to Constantine" requesting judges to be sent from Gaul to Africa to assist in abating the disputes.[26] The very fact that the Donatists appealed to Constantine proved extremely significant, for it reiterated the control that the emperor maintained over religion in the empire. Five judges were appointed and sent to help with the disputes that would not cease even after they arrived.

The second event occurred in 316 when after it became clear that the Donatist movement would not settle, Constantine "employed forcible coercion" by a letter that ordered judges and other secular authorities to intervene when disputes could not be quelled.[27] Donatus, the bishop of Carthage (one of two possible founders of the Donatist movement), encouraged resistance in spite of imperial edicts against it when on November 10, 316, he questioned, "What has the emperor to do with the church?"[28]

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[25] Michael Grant, 164.
[26] Ibid, 165.
[27] Ibid, 166.
[28] Robert Grant, 238.

Irony lies in such a statement proceeding from the mouth of a man whose party had recently appealed to the same authority he was now shunning. Yet, it remains most important to understand the significance of Constantine's intervention that evoked such a response. Never before had an emperor recognized the church or the specific practices it should follow, and never before had an emperor used the power of the state against schism. The attempt at attaining unity by employing force ended in 321 when Constantine issued a rescript to the vicar of Africa informing him that no further persecution of the Donatists should take place.[29] The withdrawal of enforcement policy was exhibited clearly in 330 when after the Donatists forcibly seized a church at Constantina, Constantine simply gave orders for a second church to be built for those whose church had been taken rather than entering "into further wrangles" with the Donatists.[30] Regardless of the end sought or the tolerance continually exhibited in this episode, Constantine had used force where it had never previously been used and had failed miserably in doing so.

A second and more dangerous heresy that threatened the unity of Constantine's empire was deemed Arianism. Arius, its founder, "possessed a genius for propaganda" and by 322 had begun to preach his ideas from his see as a presbyter in Alexandria.[31] Though many of his teachings were widely accepted and admired by the majority of the people who knew of them, he taught one doctrine that raised fiery debate for years to come. This doctrine stated that though Christ was before time and superior to all other creatures, He was of different substance, *heteroousios*, rather than of the same substance, *homoousios*, as God the Father and was therefore subject to growth and change. "There was a time when Jesus was not," was the battle cry of the Arians that brewed a storm among orthodox Christians in the empire.

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[29] Ibid, 238-239.
[30] Michael Grant, 167.
[31] Ibid, 168.

Believing himself under moral obligation to mediate and end the dispute between Arius and his major opponent Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, Constantine composed a letter and sent it to the two. The letter asked for both parties to address "objects within [their] powers and within the reach of [their natures]" and to "maintain harmony with one another in fraternal affection as servants of the same God."[32] Considered by many historians to be out of his league, Constantine nevertheless addressed such theological issues in hopes of creating unity rather than allowing diversity.

Following the excommunication of Arius by his bishop Alexander in 323 and the condemnation of him by the Synod of Antioch in 324, Constantine convened the First Council of Nicaea summoning nearly three hundred bishops who came with their supporters from throughout the empire. According to T.G. Elliot, "the key to understanding Nicaea [and Constantine's role in the meetings] is the recognition that Arianism raised a disciplinary question as well as a doctrinal one."[33]

Whether one interprets Constantine's involvement as characterized by deference or assertiveness, his intentions remain the same. In his opening address to the Council, his primary concern is voiced:

> Discord in the church I consider more fearful and painful than any other war…When I heard of your division, I was convinced that this matter should by no means be neglected, and in the desire to assist by my service, I have summoned you without delay. I shall, however, feel my desire fulfilled only when I see the minds of all united…Put away all causes of strife, and loose all knots of discord by the laws of peace.[34]

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[32] Michael Grant, 171.
[33] T.G. Elliot, "Constantine and 'the Arian Reaction after Nicaea,'" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 43 (April 1992): 173.
[34] J. Marcellus Kik, 43.

Consistent with his policy, Constantine was not as concerned with the truth regarding the essence and person of Christ as with the prevalence of tranquility and unity in the empire.[35] He neither domineered the meeting nor did he remain quietly in the background. Rather, he clearly made his wishes known while remaining deferential to the bishops presiding, regarding their collective decisions as indicating the will of God both for the Council and the Empire.[36]

In the end, the Council decided in favor of the orthodox doctrine regarding the essence of Christ and established it in the Nicene Creed which proclaimed Christ "of one substance (homoousios) with the Father."[37] Only two bishops, Theonas and Secundus of Egypt, refused to sign the formula set forth; they were banished for their obstinacy. The books of Arius were ordered to be burned and heresy in regard to the accepted Christian doctrine would thereafter be considered a crime against the state.[38] The alliance that the church had made with the state proved beneficial at this time, but subjecting itself to the will of the emperor from then on would not always yield the same return.

Though Constantine approached the Arian controversy with a stealthy and political mind and came away from the Council with the decision he had hoped for, "he did not simply walk away from Nicaea with the creed and consider the matter at an end."[39] In fact, Arianism seemed to have destroyed imperial unity just as thoroughly, if not more so, than Donatism and would last throughout his reign and many years after his death. With such disputes constantly occurring, Constantine would have to decide exactly which *kinds* of church and state he would enforce.

The man who most enduringly pledged support to the emperor during his reign was Eusebius Pamphilus of Caesarea. Born in 260 and most probably adopted by Pamphilus, a priest

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[35] J. Marcellus Kik, 42.
[36] Kenneth Setton, 54.
[37] Michael Grant, 174.
[38] J. Marcellus Kik, 43.

in Caesarea, Eusebius lived through approximately forty years free of persecution before Diocletian and Galerius rose to power.[40] In the years following Constantine's obtainment of the Roman world, Eusebius became a lifelong friend and advisor of the emperor he considered to be the messiah of the saints.

Much of what is known of Constantine and the life of the early church is recorded in the writings of Eusebius. However, one must critically examine his writings, for according to men such as Socrates, a Greek lawyer who lived in the fifth century, Eusebius was "more intent on an elaborate encomium of the Emperor than on an accurate statement of fact."[41] Few sources consider Eusebius as anything more than a servile flatterer, but in the light of his entire life and work, especially in regard to Constantine, it is more wise to characterize him "not so much a flatterer as a rather uncritical, but grateful, man."[42]

As a biased critic, Eusebius could only skim the surface of the church and state policies of Constantine that seemed to constantly contradict one another yet remain compatible and acceptable with the people of the empire. Though Constantine had acknowledged that the established church leaders should reign as "bishops within the church" and that he had "had been appointed by God as bishop of what [lay] *outside* of the church," he also emphatically stated, "My will must be binding" in regard to ecclesiastical decisions.[43] The convergence of two powers as overarching as the church and state leaves the line between the two much too hazy to prevent one from invading the jurisdiction of the other.

It is possible that Constantine firmly believed that the most efficient way to restore the ancient glory of the Roman Empire was by joining it with Christianity, the greatest religion he

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[39] T. G. Elliot, 169.
[40] Timothy Barnes, 94.
[41] Ibid, 41.
[42] Justo Gonzalez, 132 (italics added).

knew, and ruling over both simultaneously. Eusebius wrote that Constantine not only set himself up as leader of both church and state, but that he "watched over his subjects with an episcopal care and exhorted them as best he could to follow the pious life."[44] In contrast, it is also written of Constantine that he was "realistically political," and that he used his new religion merely "as a means of unifying [his] complex…empire."[45] By ruling in this manner, Constantine could see the cross of Christ not as an emblem of suffering but as "a magic totem confirming his own victoriousness."[46]

In an examination of the emperor's policies regarding Christians and pagans, church and state, one may observe the complicated system that developed. As stated previously, Constantine continued throughout his life to participate in pagan ceremonies and consult pagan oracles. According to Michael Grant, "Whatever his personal feelings, [Constantine] was probably inclined to be relatively tolerant toward pagans," because he had seen first-hand the failure of persecutions in general and had reaped benefits from owning loyalty on both sides of the religious spectrum.[47]

Constantine also seemed to be deferential to the Christian population at times. In 313, immediately after his conversion experience, the Christian clergy throughout the empire received immunity from public liturgies and from most other taxes levied on their persons or property.[48] In addition, one could earn an improved municipal charter for his hometown simply by informing the emperor that the town had become completely Christian. Above all, one must keep in mind that Christianity was the emperor's professed religion while analyzing Constantine's

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[43] Michael Grant, 182, 159.
[44] Kenneth Setton, 53.
[45] James Wood, E. Bruce Thompson, and Robert T. Miller. *Church and State*. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1958), 60.
[46] Michael Grant, 149.
[47] Ibid, 177.
[48] Timothy Barnes, 50.

church and state policies. Therefore, Christians could expect preferential treatment while pagans, though not supported in the same way, were still allowed to live comfortably and retain their temples, shrines, and sacred groves.[49]

Constantine seemed to cautiously support both paganism and Christianity in favor of unity, but at times, blatant contradictions arose. During his reign, he authorized the destruction of several pagan temples at Aegeae in Cilicia, Heliopolis in Syria, and Aphaca in Phoenicia to name a few.[50] This completely contradicted his edicts concerning the preservation of pagan temples and property he had previously issued. In regard to tax exemption for all Christian clergy, he later narrowed the number who qualified for immunity by only offering it to those who were clergy holding to the orthodox faith he supported. In addition to refusing tax exemption to non-catholic clergy, he stated that these men should also "be bound and subjected to various public services."[51] Constantine had begun to treat those he considered unorthodox in the same manner that those before him had treated any person who professed to be a Christian.

Perhaps most contradictory to Constantine's professed beliefs and policies was his direct involvement in the executions of Sopater, one of his principal friends and advisers, Flavia Maxima Fausta, his second wife, and Flavius Julius Crispus, his eldest son. Sopater is said to have been beheaded on the ludicrous pretext that he had magically controlled the winds and kept much needed food from arriving at Constantinople, a city suffering from famine at the time.[52] The true reason Sopater met his death was that Ablabius, a praetorian prefect, was jealous of his power and incited the emperor against him.[53]

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[49] Timothy Barnes, 211.
[50] Michael Grant, 180.
[51] Robert Grant, 248.
[52] Ibid, 244.
[53] Michael Grant, 110.

The executions of Crispus and Fausta in 326 were closely connected in the web of jealousy, deceit, and uncontrolled desire for power that had formed in the imperial house. Crispus was the eldest son of Constantine but not of Fausta, for she had bore Constantine three other sons. Fausta hoped that one of her own sons would become first in line for the succession of Constantine as emperor in place of Crispus. Either by accusing Crispus of illegitimate relations with herself or by concocting a plot that named him as a conspirator seeking the throne for himself, Fausta eventually convinced the emperor to condemn his own son to death.[54] Soon after, a guilty conscience overcame the emperor for committing such an atrocity, and Fausta was accused of committing adultery with a slave in the imperial stables. Being "greatly disposed to puritanical sexual legislation" and the belief that he was doing right by putting an end to the woman who incited him against his own son, Constantine promptly had Fausta executed as well.[55] Neither of these actions may in any way be justified according to the political and religious grounds that Constantine claimed to stand upon. Incredibly, "Constantine was one of those few and fortunate people who could…mingle two sorts of motives so they turned out to be indistinguishable."[56]

The death of Constantine on May 22, 337 most certainly did not signify the cessation of his impact on the world in the near or distant future. Within the church, monasticism and personal devotion increased exponentially as many who opposed the institutionalization of the church sought alternative ways of life. Persecution remained unlawful so that even those emperors thereafter who did not favor Christianity sought to restore paganism without hurting members of the church. The most prominent long-term effect that Constantine seems to have

[54] Arnaldo Momigliano, 48.
[55] Michael Grant, 114.
[56] Ibid, 150.

instigated regarding the church, however, has been identified as the steady movement of the church toward being reduced to "the level of a department of state."[57]

Constantine's legislation, though permeated by goodwill, created daunting problems during his reign as well as during the regimes of those who followed him. By attempting to improve the personal morality of the general population and those involved in the government, especially in regard to sexual misconduct, he neglected the practicality of laws regarding morals of particular religions being enforced and followed. Therefore, Grant is accurate in his assertion that "Constantine's legislation on such subjects proved useless and had no efficacy whatsoever" in Roman criminal law.[58]

The reign of Constantine was one of professedly unified intentions expressed in actions that left one observing it either in awe of his skillful leadership or puzzled with the contradictory and enigmatic nature of it. Consequently, the people he ruled over lived in "a perfect oblivion of past evils [in which]…nothing but the enjoyment of the present blessings" [seemed] to cross their minds.[59] Such times may not be characterized more exactly than as splendidly and unanimously ambiguous.

[57] James Wood, E. Bruce Thompson, and Robert T. Miller, 60.
[58] Michael Grant, 185.
[59] Eusebius Pamphilus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 439.

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