St. Constantine the Great: An Orthodox Perspective

By Marina Shelly Havach[1]

Abstract: The policies and person of Roman emperor Constantine I are often seen as having played a negative role in the development of church-state relations. On the other hand, Orthodox Christians venerate him as St. Constantine the Great, Equal to the Apostles. This essay elucidates the Orthodox view of Constantine by engaging with the historical literature to answer some of the most common charges made against him.

Key terms: Constantine I, Constantinianism, anti-Constantinianism, Constantinian shift, Eastern Orthodox Church, sanctity

1 Introduction

Much has been written of late on Roman emperor Constantine I's role in the history of church-state relations. Some, including prominent theologians John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, believe that his policies had a very negative effect on the development of Christianity, a change they call the "Constantinian shift." In extending his imperial endorsement to a once persecuted group, Constantine is said to have sold out the Church, with far-reaching implications.

But was Constantine really as bad as his detractors claim? Even more, was Constantine himself a Constantinian? As I will show, the charges commonly leveled against Constantine do not hold up under historical scrutiny.

Constantine was neither a cynical crypto-pagan, nor did his policies corrupt a once-glorious Church of martyrs. He was just another sinner trying to answer the age-old question: what does it mean to follow Christ *right now*? In Constantine's case, that meant

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combining the duties of a Roman emperor with the demands of a new faith.

My aim in writing this article is to present the viewpoint of a young Orthodox Christian laywoman. I am neither a theologian nor a Church historian, having instead received training in philosophy and comparative literature. That said, along with other Orthodox Christians, I consider Constantine to be a saint, and I pray for his intercession to God.

This assessment of Constantine emphasizes above all the fact of his holiness, and only secondarily his apostolic service to the Church as the first Christian emperor. Neither denying nor diminishing his many questionable actions, I shall present them as part of a greater story that ended with Constantine's justification.

2 The Charges against Constantine

I shall now address the most common charges made against Constantine, responding to each with historical arguments and examples.

2.1 That Constantine was not really a Christian

A view of Constantine as a cynical manipulator of popular religious sentiment predominates in secular Western opinion, not in the least due to *The Da Vinci Code*. In the medieval period, Constantine had been promoted in both East and West "as the standard against which medieval rulers were measured," but the 1576 rediscovery and translation of pagan writer Zosimus' negative characterization gave Renaissance humanists ammunition against the traditional hagiographic picture.[2]

Later scholars continued in a similar vein: in his classic 1853 study (still in print), German historian Jacob Burckhardt scoffs at the possibility that Constantine could have believed in anything at all. "In a genius driven without surcease by ambition and lust for power," writes Burckhardt, "there can be no question of Christianity and paganism, of conscious religiosity or irreligiosity[;] such a man is essentially unreligious."[3] Not only was Constantine not a Chris-

[2] Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 273–4.

[3] *The Age of Constantine the Great*, 292.

tian, Burckhardt and others argued, he did not care for anything but power.[4]

All of this changed in 1929 with Norman Baynes' seminal lecture *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church.* As Peter J. Leithart notes,

> At least since Norman Baynes…there has been a growing consensus among English-speaking scholars on some central questions about the first Christian emperor…Today, few specialists in the period question the fact that Constantine was a "real" Christian, and those who want to dispute the accounts of his conversion do so because they think he grew up a Christian.[5]

Leithart's assertion is well founded. Major works on Constantine describing him as a committed Christian include Andreas Alföldi's *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (1948), Timothy Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius* (1982), Charles Matson Odahl's *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (2004), and most recently Paul Stephenson's biography *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor* (2009). For better or worse, these scholars conclude, Constantine believed in Christ.

There remains much speculation concerning Constantine's conversion. Some think it occurred after his victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in 312; others believe it happened gradually over the course of many years. The traditional hagiographical literature[6] (along with some modern scholars)[7] asserts the former, but many modern writers hold the latter position.[8] Regardless of the circumstances, the important thing is that Constantine converted and was eventually baptized into the Church.

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[4] Edward Gibbon, author of the influential *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, also considered Constantine to be an opportunist, if perhaps an earnestly "Christian" one.

[5] *Defending Constantine*, 9–10.

[6] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 82; Dimitry of Rostov, "Zhitiie," 903.

[7] "In 312 [Constantine] experienced a religious conversion which profoundly affected his conception of himself." Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 275; also see Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 79–82.

[8] "Conversion is never a momentary phenomenon," asserts Stephenson; "it is only held to have been upon reflection and with hindsight." *Constantine*, 168.

The popular claim that Constantine was simply riding the wave of greater religious trends for personal gain does not find support in the facts, either. Constantine's ambition and political acumen were not tarnished by the cynicism we associate with these qualities today.

Like other Roman leaders before him, Constantine sought divine aid and protection for himself and his subjects.[9] A committed monotheist, he had been taught from childhood to honor the *summus deus*, or "supreme god."[10]

Constantine continued to search for this God throughout his life.[11] When one day he envisioned a cross with the words: *en touto nika* ("in this, win"), Constantine was stunned. Some Christian soldiers interpreted this vision as being of their God. Convinced of the sign's power, Constantine ordered that it[12] be inscribed on all shields before marching against Maxentius. And he won.

Following this victory, Constantine realized that the Christian God was indeed his long-sought *summus deus*. "[Constantine's] conversion [in 312] was not the final decision in a long internal search for moral regeneration and personal salvation; but it was not a momentary act of pure political expediency either," explains Odahl. "His revelatory experiences convinced him that the God of the Christians had answered his sincere prayers."[13] Thus did Constantine begin his journey in Christ.

Constantine refused to make the traditional pagan sacrifice upon his victorious entry into Rome,[14] instead offering prayers of thanks-

[9] As a Roman emperor, he held the traditional title of *pontifex maximus*, or highest priest: the health of the empire was linked with religious devotion. For more on this, see Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 245; Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 327.
[10] Stephenson, *Constantine*, 167.
[11] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 80.
[12] There is some debate as to whether the "sign" was initially a cross, a Chi-Rho, or a similar symbol, but the details are not particularly important. All were explicitly Christian symbols; all contained a cross.
[13] *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 91–2.
[14] Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 328.

giving to the God who had given him victory.[15] In 313, he issued the Edict of Milan, ending nearly three centuries of persecution.

Coming years brought Christianizing legislation, such as the eventual outlawing of gladiatorial games and all other forms of blood sacrifice. Constantine wanted to replace them with the unbloody sacrifice of the Eucharist.[16] He built a new city in Byzantium entirely free of pagan temples, and he gave explicitly Christian sermons to people in his court.

Timothy Barnes summarizes his reign thus: "After 312 Constantine considered that his main duty as emperor was to inculcate virtue in his subjects and to persuade them to worship God…He believed sincerely that God had given him a special mission to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity."[17] As it turns out, not only was Constantine a Christian — he was a missionary.

2.2 That Constantine wanted to make Christianity compulsory

Some, however, misinterpret the means by which Constantine tried to spread faith in Christ. Constantine did not establish Christianity as the state religion of the Empire: this was done long after his death by the emperor Theodosius in 380. Whether or not establishment was a good move on Theodosius' part I leave to further consideration.

The point I wish to make here is that Constantine was, by fourth-century standards, surprisingly tolerant of other religions.

In his toleration of paganism, Constantine took after Lactantius, a Christian apologist and teacher of Latin rhetoric who became one of his closest advisors.[18] An edict issued to the Eastern provinces following Constantine's victory over Licinius in 324 (reproduced in Eusebius' *Life*) states his views on toleration most explicitly:

> For the general good of the world and of all mankind I desire that your people be at peace and stay free from strife. Let those in error, as well

[15] Dimitry of Rostov, "Zhitiie," 903.
[16] Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 328–9.
[17] *Constantine and Eusebius*, 275.
[18] Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 110.

> as the believers, gladly receive the benefit of peace and quiet…May none molest another; may each retain what his soul desires, and practise it… let no one use what he has received by inner conviction as a means to harm his neighbour. What each has seen and understood, he must use, if possible, to help the other; but if that is impossible, the matter should be dropped.[19]

Constantine accepted the truth of Christianity, but he did not believe that the "easy" yoke of Christ (Matt 11:30) could or should be imposed by force: "It is one thing to take on willingly the contest for immortality, quite another to enforce it with sanctions."[20] Pagans continued to occupy important government positions, and "Constantine extended the same tax exemption to synagogue heads and other Jewish leaders that he offered to Christian priests."[21]

Constantine made no secret, however, of his allegiance to Christ as the "only-begotten Son of God" (Nicene Creed), nor did he hide his disdain for those who did not agree, especially pagans. He passed laws "prohibit[ing] Jews from attacking converts to Christianity" under pain of burning,[22] and greatly limited the pagan practice of divination.[23] This open (and sometimes brutal) promotion of Christianity on Constantine's part runs contrary to today's sensibilities, informed as they are by the Lockean conception of religion as a strictly private matter.

Leithart makes a good case for the coherence of Constantine's position over Locke's which, he concludes, "pretends to offer a level playing field" but really favors religions that make no claims other than over one's own Sunday morning.[24] One may well take issue with Constantine's methods, but one wonders whether it is even possible, let alone desirable, for government officials to disregard their closest-held beliefs when making decisions of state.

Many Westerners, including a good number of Christians, are uncomfortable with the idea of a society promoting Christianity as

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[19] Qtd. in *Life of Constantine*, 113–4.
[20] Ibid., 114.
[21] Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 132.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 52.
[24] *Defending Constantine*, 144.

the one true Faith. Witch burning, the Inquisition, and the Crusades immediately come to mind. Orthodox Christians, however, have not traditionally been so wary of explicit promotion of Christianity on the part of state leaders. As Timothy Ware (now Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia) writes in *The Orthodox Church*,

> There are many today…who sharply criticize the Byzantine Empire and the idea of a Christian society for which it stands. Yet were the Byzantines entirely wrong? They believed that Christ, who lived on earth as a man, had redeemed every aspect of human existence, and held therefore that it was possible to baptize not human individuals only but the whole spirit and organization of society.[25]

The Orthodox ideal is one of *symphonia*, of a harmony between Church and State, rather than an artificial division between the two. Successive Byzantine emperors often overstepped their bounds, meddling in affairs best left to conscience. But Constantine did not see himself as arbiter of all things sacred: instead, he deferred to bishops, and ultimately to God. In Leithart's words, he "knew…[that] neither society nor social space, neither public life nor the space in which it takes place, can be religiously neutral."[26]

2.3 That Constantine thought of himself as head of the Church as well as head of state

Constantine's policies are often seen as leading to the overt caesaropapism of later regimes, East and West. Bishops of the time saw the first Christian emperor as a natural adjudicator, and Constantine reluctantly accepted this role — but only to a point. He interfered in the Donatist controversy of the African Church, and he summoned the first Church council at Nicaea.

In both cases, it should be noted, he had been called upon by bishops and others to become involved. "If anyone is to blame for starting a process that subordinated the Church to the emperor," writes Leithart, "it is not Constantine but the Donatists. He was *invited* to sit…Rather than accepting the appeal [of a Donatist bish-

[25] *The Orthodox Church*, 50.
[26] Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 145.

bishop] directly, Constantine deflected responsibility to the bishops who were to be assembled at Rome."[27]

One must keep in mind that the Church was an entirely new sort of institution, and thus it represented a stumbling block to generations of Roman emperors. This "new Israel, an independent 'nation' *within* the empire without ethnic or social or geographic boundaries" was "unprecedented."[28] Under Constantine, a precarious balance was established between the emperor and the episcopacy that was later to be tilted. Through the centuries, however, it has helped to have the Creed as a guide — a direct result of imperial interference.

2.4 That Constantine did a lot of un-Christian things

The final charge I will consider is one often made of Christians: namely, that they do not live up to their principles. Constantine was a military leader as well as a Roman emperor, and it can be assumed that he personally killed a number of people, as well as giving orders to kill. Torture was still widely used during his reign, and harsh punishments persisted.[29]

Amongst all the evil things of which Constantine is accused, the deaths of his son Crispus and wife Fausta stand out. Whatever the reasons for these alleged executions, they are certainly a sordid affair.[30] We must remember, however, that our Lord did "not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matt 9:13). There is a long history in the Church of sinners, even murderers, answering this call: St. Moses the Black, a fourth-century Ethiopian desert father, started life as the leader of a violent gang of bandits, and the twentieth-century Russian saint Silouan of Mt. Athos once nearly killed a man with a blow to the chest before beginning his own path of repentance. "Wondrous is God in His saints," declares the

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[27] Ibid., 157.
[28] Ibid., 183.
[29] Ibid., 328.
[30] For more on the deaths of Fausta and Crispus, see Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 180–3; Stephenson, *Constantine*, 219–23; Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 228–30. Eusebius and other hagiographers either gloss over these events or (like Dimitry of Rostov) do not mention them at all.

Psalmist (Ps 67:35).[31] In them, we see the "crooked…made straight" (Luke 3:5) and fallen human nature redeemed. Constantine was not perfect, but in the end, claim the Orthodox, he pleased God.

3 Epilogue: St. Constantine the Great

The most serious problem with attacks on Constantine is the confusion of Constantine with "Constantinianism." The first is a man who lived in time and space, a human being called to be the first Christian emperor. The second is a set of abstractions, a collection of critiques largely based in modern anxieties about living an authentic life in Christ.

One is a unique person loved by God; the other is merely a useful construct for the testing of conscience. We must be careful of the Church, but we must always remember that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). God's ways are not our ways. He provides in a manner we cannot fathom. In the Orthodox view, it pleased Him that His Church be permitted to spread and prosper on ground prepared by the blood of the martyrs.

Anti-Constantinians are concerned about trying to serve both God and Caesar, and they challenge Christians to live by their conscience. These are serious concerns — Constantine himself shared them. In his final days on Earth, he is said to have doffed the imperial purple for the simple white of baptism: like all the saints, he finally rejected sin and "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). He did not resume his imperial duties and spent his last days in repentance.[32]

"Constantine," writes Leithart, "seemed to believe that there was a basic incompatibility between being an emperor and being a Christian, between court and church, warfare and prayer, the purple

[31] Here I follow the Septuagint numbering, according to the Orthodox tradition. The translation is from the *Psalter According to the Seventy* published by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Boston.

[32] According to Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 178. Dimitry of Rostov repeats an account from the medieval *Acts of the Blessed Silvester* ("Zhitiie," 904–6), according to which Constantine was baptized much earlier under dramatic circumstances. Leithart believes this account to be spurious (*Defending Constantine*, 299).

and the white."[33] His conscience clean, Constantine reposed in the Lord. Along the way, he brought a great many people to Christ, bravely attempting to live his faith as the leader of a vast empire. For this reason, Orthodox Christians venerate him as "equal to the apostles."[34]

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[33] *Defending Constantine*, 300.

[34] In Orthodoxy, the title "equal-to-the-apostles" (Greek: *isapostolos*; Slavonic: *ravnoapostol'nyi*) is traditionally given to those saints who have greatly contributed to the spread of Christianity, such as St. Nina, enlightener of Georgia, and SS. Cyril and Methodius, missionaries to the Slavs.