

Review Article: Why Ethics needs accurate church history— reflections on books on Constantine the Great

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Peter J. Leithart (PhD Cambridge, President of Trinity House, Birmingham, Alabama) has written an important book to defend the honour of Emperor Constantine, *The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2010. ISBN 978-0-8308-2722-0 Pb pp373). It is above all directed against the thesis of the American Mennonite John Howard Yoder (1927-1997), for whom Constantine was the epitome of Christianity's falling away from its pacifistic origins and who stands for the centuries-long evil of the state church and for the persecution of heretics.

I Twilight of an Empire

Leithart does not set out to make an original contribution to research. Rather, he seeks to present the much more positive description of Constantine found in specialized literature as well as the shift in the view of Constantine found in scholarly circles instead of the deeply held prejudices of many present-day Christians. With enormous diversity, he unfurls research literature in the footnotes from the last hundred years and demonstrates that the actual Constantine has neither to do with the acclaimed Christian emperor of the Middle Ages, nor with the bogeyman of the Enlightenment, but also not with the bogeyman of free church authors. Constantine can be understood only in light of the reality of the 4th century and could not have known what the future would bring.

Measured against that, in Leithart's

opinion, Constantine was a convinced believer in Christianity who found a path between advancing the Christian faith and offering religious freedom to the majority of the non-Christian population. In the process, one always has to take the entire spectrum of results from research into consideration. Thus there are unmistakable and noteworthy influences from the side of Christianity upon his legislation and, on the other hand, there are completely uninfluenced areas as well.

Let us for instance take architecture (pp. 112-125) as an example of the 'complexity' (p. 113) and 'ambiguity' (p. 114) of Constantine's actions. On the one hand, the Emperor built a large number of public buildings which were thoroughly adorned with Roman and Greek religious art. On the other hand, the building of churches in Rome and then in Byzantium stood at the

centre of his personal interest. A typical example is the Arch of Constantine in Rome. At first it may not appear as if it differs from other such structures. Apart from what are in part Christian military emblems, a direct Christian connection is lacking.

On the other hand, nowhere are the Roman gods thanked, most notably Jupiter as was common up to that time. An image of Jupiter is indeed visible, but Constantine is turning his back to it. Instead, the great God who revealed himself to Constantine is thanked. Christians understood this from a Christian point of view, while for others it was not automatically an affront.

Christian symbols are also a good example. For a longer period of time after 312 A.D., they were on coins and standards in addition to older religious symbols. Gradually, Christian symbols replaced older religious symbols up to the point when pagan deities represented by human depictions finally served only as mythical decoration (pp. 71-79).

Was Constantine's conversion to Christianity a 'true' conversion? Leithart correctly emphasizes that the question is really to ask what was meant *at that time*? Constantine took the Christological decision made at Nicea personally (pp. 89-90), which is more important for us today than at that time. Leithart could have at this stage pointed out more clearly—as Girardet did in the works that are discussed below—that conversion above all else meant giving up idol worship. What should have been worked out much more intensely is the central role played by renouncing sacrifice to Jupiter after the victory over the co-emperor (pp. 66-67). Leithart quotes a 1955

German source at this point, which, however, he was arguably not able to read. He is not aware of the comprehensive German studies on this subject (see below).

Leithart is also on the right track with respect to other questions. However, he could have had better supporting documents to cite in the form of German sources and would have been able to point out more strongly the significance of his results. Leithart thus assumes that Constantine's actual vision of the cross took place in 310 A.D. in Grand in the Vosges Mountains (today in France), probably as a halo (pp. 77-78). However, he does not cite the newest evidence for this.

Fortunately, Leithart labels the Edict of Milan a 'fiction' (pp. 98-99). Both Emperors Constantine and Licinius indeed agreed after a meeting in Milan via a letter dated June 313 A.D. from Nicomedia stating that confiscated church property would be returned and religious freedom for Christians granted. However, it did not establish their leading position, let alone Christianity's position as a state religion (pp. 99-100). As a matter of fact, Constantine did not limit the freedom of non-Christians.

Leithart is increasingly concerned not only with saving Constantine's honour. He is also concerned to present Constantine as a model for Christian politics. From Leithart's point of view, the following applies: 'Constantine provides in many respects a model for Christian political practice' (p.11). The statement that in many respects Constantine stands for Christian political action goes far beyond that which Leithart documents and especially what he refutes.

It is indeed to be acknowledged that Constantine humanized law and ended brutal elements of Roman culture due to Christian motivation. Constantine also accomplished the fostering of Christianity without limiting the religious freedom of others. But is that sufficient for him to function as a role model? Would one not have had to discuss more carefully whether it is simultaneously possible to promote Christianity as a religion desired by the head of state and religious freedom as well? Would one not have to discuss the degree to which a Christian as a leader of state can and should shape the political scene?

Leithart comprehensively documents the one-sided nature of the viewpoint held by Yoder and others that the early church was completely pacifistic, that it did not change its point of view until with or after Constantine, and that serving in the Roman Army was not allowed. The fact of the matter is that there was a broad discussion in the early church regarding this question. Also, Christians served as soldiers and officers in the Roman army (pp. 255-278), which simultaneously held police powers, already prior to Constantine and all the way back to the time of the apostles.

However, one also has at this point a long way to go before seeing Constantine in the position of a role model, which in the absence of pacifism would have to clear up the question of how the relationship of the Christian church to legal institutions within the state monopoly on power should look.

I would have personally wished for a clearer division in Leithart's book between an historical section on Constantine and an ethical segment on the

relationship between the church and state. Since Yoder mixes both questions beyond recognition, Leithart follows him, even if it is much simpler to separate Leithart's thoughts on one point from the other.

For me it involves four complex issues which become blurred: 1) What can reliably be said about the biography of Constantine? 2) How much of Christianity from the late Middle Ages is traceable back to Constantine and how much is not? This is to ask whether the Constantinian Age is correctly so-called or not. 3) What is good and right—that means, what is biblically and theologically ideal? and 4) How is Constantine and the later development of the Middle Ages to be evaluated in light of the ideal, or is such an evaluation not even able to be made?

Given the strong fixation the book has on Yoder, above all in the latter section (pp. 254-342), and the announced transition from biography to polemics in the course of the book (pp. 10-11), this work is unfortunately tailored to the American market and especially in the latter part is not relevant for Christians in Europe or in the Southern hemisphere.

II A German View

Let us juxtapose Leithart's book on Constantine with the books by the German researcher Klaus Girardet.

A) Klaus M. Girardet, *Der Kaiser und sein Gott: Das Christentum im Denken und in der Religionspolitik Konstantins des Großen* [title translation: *The Emperor and his God: Christianity in Constantine the Great's Thought and Religious Politics*] *Millenium-Studien* 27. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), p. 212.

B) Klaus M. Girardet (ed.), *Kaiser Konstantin der Große: Historische Leistung und Rezeption in Europa* [title translation: *Emperor Constantine the Great: Historical Achievements and Their Reception in Europe*] (Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 2007), in part, Klaus M. Girardet, "Das Christentum in Denken und in der Politik Kaiser Konstantin d. Gr." [title translation: "Christianity in the Thought and Politics of Emperor Constantine the Great"], pp. 29-54.

C) Klaus M. Girardet, *Die konstantinische Wende: Voraussetzungen und geistige Grundlagen der Religionspolitik Konstantins des großen* [title translation; *The Constantinian Turn: Preconditions and Spiritual Foundations of the Religious Policies of Constantine the Great*] (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006.1; 2000.2).

The reason for the intensive amount of research on Constantine from the German side is, among others, that Trier was for a time his capital city.

Girardet differentiates three fields of research (A, pp. 22-24): 1. A basic approach that Constantine was already innately Christian, or that between 310 and 312 A.D. or over a longer period of time he turned towards Christianity. 2. Perceptions that Constantine turned towards monotheism and/or a solar cult with certain Christian elements but did not become a Christian according to standards of that time or the present. 3. The notion that there are no indications for either the first or the second interpretation.

In one of his articles, he answers the question, 'Were there Christian Emperors before Constantine?' (C, pp. 13-38) very convincingly with a negative answer by reference to every individual emperor and his family prior

to Constantine. Girard also tellingly rejects modern standards for whether Constantine's conversion was 'real' or 'correct' and whether Constantine was 'orthodox' (C, p. 59). He assumes that the preeminent sign of being a Christian and of becoming a Christian in antiquity and in the 4th century was the 'renunciation of the cult of the gods' (C, p. 60).

Thus what has to be asked above all is whether Constantine carried this out. 'The refusal to sacrifice to idols' is something that is well documented with respect to Constantine. (C, pp. 60-71, A, pp. 78-88). This is due to the fact, among others, that after the victory over his co-emperor, Constantine moved directly into his palace following his victory procession in Rome on October 29, 312 A.D. (which strictly speaking was not one since it was the co-emperor and not enemies who had been defeated). Also, and for all to see, he did not present the normal sacrifice to Jupiter Optimus Maximus at the capitol.

Girardet finds many pieces of evidence for this. The heathen historian Zosimos (II 7.2) sees the act of omitting the thank offering to Jupiter as the reason for the beginning of the political decline of Rome (C, p. 70). The thank-offering to Jupiter is also missing on the Arch of Constantine erected in 315 A.D., where instead of thanks to Jupiter one sees *instinctu divinitatis*, an expression of thanks to the inspiration of the Godhead. It is striking that in accounts beginning in 312 A.D., or even on the Arch of Constantine, God, who brought about the victory, initially has no name. Rather, God is generally referred to as *summa divitas* or something similar (C, p. 68).

Shortly after the refusal to present the thank offering to Jupiter in 312 A.D., the first coins appear with a Christogram (B, p. 42). Everything speaks for there already being an emblem of Christ on the helmet of the emperor and on standards (A, pp. 64-67), on which the emblem of Christ was arguably not the familiar cross but rather the Chi-Rho.

Girardet elaborates extensively on the three central texts regarding the vision of the sign of Christ at the Milvian Bridge (A, pp. 30-40). Nowhere is it said, according to Girardet, that the vision first occurred at the bridge (A S. 49-51). Constantine is instead supposed to have seen a so-called 'halo' in Grand in what is today the French Vosges Mountains. His accompanying military escort command was also then able to see it. A halo is an atmospheric light effect caused by the refraction or reflection of light by ice crystals. It can take the form of a small inner sun with four rays going in all directions like a cross.

Furthermore, Girardet provides a lot of evidence from Constantine's early speeches beginning in 312 A.D. that demonstrate his partisanship for Christianity (A, pp 89-123). Constantine's late baptism is a normal thing from Girardet's point of view and was at that time common, especially since Constantine apparently assumed that he would no longer be able to wear the imperial purple clothing afterwards (A, pp 106-107).

Girardet's account, 'Nichtchristen im Denken und Handeln Konstantins' ('Non-Christians in Constantine's Thought and Actions,' C, pp. 113-133, see also A, pp. 137-139) is also interesting. Constantine forced Christian-

ity upon no one and allowed heathens their freedom. Like Leithart, he sees in Constantine a measure of the element of religious freedom not found in Roman emperors prior to that time.

III Essays

Let us now take a look at a number of essays published by Girardet. Tiziana J. Chiusi ('Der Einfluß des Christentums auf die Gesetzgebung Konstantins' [title translation: 'The Influence of Christianity on Constantine's Legislation']. pp. 55-64 in: Klaus M. Girardet [ed.], *Kaiser Konstantin der Große* [title translation: *Emperor Constantine the Great*], op cit.) shows Constantine's legislative ambivalence. More strict laws against the flight of slaves stand next to laws calling for humane treatment of slaves and the favouring of their release (B, p. 60). Clear Christian influence is seen in the abolishment of the death penalty by crucifixion, the prohibition of facial branding, the prohibition of gladiator games (B, p. 61), and the introduction of Sunday as a day of rest, a clear promotion of and publicity for Christianity (B, p. 63).

I find the three foundational changes within Christianity brought about by Constantine and listed and explained by Karl-Heinz Ohlig to be groundbreaking ('Strukturelle Auswirkungen der Konstantinischen Wende auf das Christentum' [title translation: 'Structural Repercussions of the Constantinian Turn on Christianity'], pp. 75-86 in Klaus M. Girardet [Hg.], *Kaiser Konstantin der Große* [title translation: *Emperor Constantine the Great*]): the sacralization of Christianity, the Hellenization of Christianity, and the provision of a legal basis for Christianity.

The sacralization of Christianity had above all to do with the role of the church, its offices and the sacraments, since from that time on ritualistic practice led by sacral men has been central (B, p. 81). The legal basis for Christianity has been maintained in the Catholic Church until today and is foundational within it (B, p. 82). According to Ohlig, however, the most far-reaching consequences are attributed to the Hellenization of Christianity (B, p. 85). These are all issues which Leithart does not address.

These are all stimulating studies which highlight the importance of Constantine not only in Christian history but also his relevance for today as we grapple with many serious ethical and political issues. This makes it clear that religious freedom research is more

important than ever. There needs to be an examination of the present reality worldwide as well as the background history of previous centuries. There also needs to be discussion about the various philosophical and theological arguments employed in discussion of religious freedom. This includes going well back in history—for example, to the Reformers, and asking, for instance, why John Calvin proposed religious freedom in theory but failed to bring it about in reality; it also means going further back to the Middle Ages, and finally to the beginning of Christianity. The books reviewed and the thesis connected with Constantine prove that what happened then still counts today and that deeper research needs to be done to evaluate the factors involved in those early times.

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Volume 39 No. 1 January 2015