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Lambs Into Lions

By PAULA FREDRIKSEN

Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance by H. A. Drake (Johns Hopkins University Press, 609 pp., \$68)

MORE CHRISTIANS WERE persecuted by the Roman Empire after Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 than before. Within a century of that momentous event, bishops had become the impresarios of urban violence, directing the Christian mob's destruction of synagogues and great pagan temples from Minorca to the edges of Persia, while the imperial government shut down traditional public cults in North Africa and in Rome itself. By the reign of the emperor Justinian, from 527 to 565, recalcitrant pagans risked crucifixion by the Christian state. And yet Christianity was a religion that prided itself on its passivism, and on its ethic of an expansive love extended even to enemies; a religion whose spokesmen, during the long centuries of its own persecution, had tirelessly argued that true belief cannot be coerced; a religion whose founder, Jesus of Nazareth, had himself died by Rome's hand. Why, then, did the emperor decide to throw his prestige and his patronage behind such a faith? And how did Christians come so readily to avail themselves of the powers of coercion?

Historians since Gibbon, when addressing these two questions, have linked their answers. Focusing their inquiry on the inner or spiritual quality of Constantine's conversion, they have divided between seeing him as either a sincere (if naive) believer or a crafty opportunist exploiting the political possibilities of his new religious allegiance. Their various reconstructions depend upon their view of the evidence that Constantine continued to support and to appeal to traditional polytheist cults in the years after 312. Proponents of the insincere Constantine point precisely to his tolerance of these other religions; defenders of the sincere Constantine find various ways to excuse or to explain his tolerance. But both these interpretations rest upon the same assumption: that a true Christian is an intolerant Christian. And this assumption in turn supports the answer to the question of Christianity's resort to violence: that normative Christianity, too, is intolerant. It embraced coercion as soon as the state enabled it to. Any Christian society will inevitably, invariably, be a persecuting society.

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NOT SO, RESPONDS H.A. Drake. He urges that these answers, and the questions that frame them, are essentially misconceived. "Coercion;" which is asocial practice of political organizations, cannot be understood by appeal to "intolerance;" which is a characteristic of religious systems. Owing to their persistent use of theological concepts in the effort to understand political problems, Drake maintains, most historians have seriously misdiagnosed the causes, the origins, and the nature of Christian coercion. His proposed remedy is to study not theology, but social processes; to analyze not religion or theology as such, but politics.

By concentrating on politics, which he calls "the art of getting things done," Drake reveals how various Christians in the fourth century won agreement, mobilized support, and gained consensus both inside and outside the imperial government. In his pages, *The Power Game: How Washington Works* stands shoulder to shoulder with *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; Saul Alinsky and Richard Nixon together illumine the near-solid murk of the Christological controversies; and Athanasius of Alexandria emerges as antiquity's equivalent of a Tammany Hall boss. The result is a refreshingly original and powerfully argued re-conception of the issues and the forces at work in this period of the conversion not of Constantine, but of Christianity.

To build his case, Drake begins where the empire began--with Octavian, Julius Caesar's nephew and heir. After he emerged victorious in the civil war against Mark Antony, Octavian consolidated his position without alienating the Senate as his uncle had done. About his power, there was no question: his command of the army ensured it. To rule effectively, however, he sought *auctoritas*, legitimacy, which in this post-Republican moment only the Senate could confer. Through elaborate public displays of mutual respect, both Octavian and the Senate enacted the pretense that he ruled at their request, as *primus inter pares*.

In modern political terms, Octavian and the senators were "players:" They each had "constituencies:" In Octavian's case, this was the army, especially the Praetorian Guard, the elite force that he retained in Italy; and the senators' constituencies were the literate, highly educated clients populating their patronage networks, upon whose talents the administration of the empire depended. Running the empire was "the Game" that they all played (wherein each player tries to get maximum value for the interests of his or her constituency while paying the minimum for those of any other player). As long as the frontiers remained quiet, the charade of civilian control could remain

intact, and the government could continue to present itself as SPQR, or *senatus populusque romanus*, "the Senate and the people of Rome:" In reality, however, armies made emperors. An emperor's *auctoritas* was only as secure as his *potestas*, his military power.

The empire's well-being, in the view of its ancient inhabitants, depended not only on this concert of armies, senators, and emperors. Even more important was the good will of the gods. Heaven superintended the empire and the myriad cities that made it up. Ancients solicited divine beneficence through innumerable public and communal rituals of procession, blood sacrifice, lustration, offerings, and song. These observances were embedded in the social life of the ancient city, where activities that to us might seem non-religious-the theater, rhetorical or athletic competitions, the convening of a city council or a court of law-invariably involved some sort of acknowledgment of and offering to traditional deities, as well as to the *numen* of the emperor.

Thus both the Roman state and the individual cities constituting it can most usefully be thought of as religious institutions. Octavian knew this well; and the importance of this vital dimension of ancient politics is attested by the novel title "Augustus"-a term with vaguely religious connotations-that was conferred upon him by the Senate. As Augustus, Octavian ruled by the mandate of heaven. More than just a general or a leader, he was *pontifex maximus*, the "supreme priest," the pope of the Roman state religion.

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BUT IN THE third century things went drastically wrong. Every frontier of the empire, battered by foreign invasions, collapsed; and inflation raged; and domestic and military chaos ensued. During the five middle decades of the third century, the army put up twenty-four emperors. The political crisis reflected a religious one. Such cataclysmic disasters could only have come about because of a breach of the *pax deorum*, the peace of the gods. The empire suffered because the gods were angry. Why? In 250, the emperor Decius seized upon the same answer that the empire's cities, for almost two centuries, had proposed to account for disaster on a more local scale: human impiety had angered the gods. Put yet more simply, the problem was the Christians.

Christianity had begun to penetrate the cities of the Mediterranean by the middle of the first century. As long as it remained primarily a Jewish movement, it was by and large left alone. The earliest Christians were protected by the general

tolerance that pagan culture had long accorded Diaspora Judaism, which was a familiar fixture of the Mediterranean religious landscape. This fact in itself may not seem so remarkable, since religious pluralism was a hallmark of majority culture in general and of the Roman Empire in particular. Ancient peoples typically worshipped their own ancestral gods, which formed aggregates of larger pantheons as politics required. Thus Rome's principled ecumenism was culturally congenial and politically pragmatic: as long as taxes were paid, tribute collected, and domestic tranquility assured, its subject peoples were free to worship as they would, while the divinities of Rome and its emperors took their place in the congested liturgical calendars of the empire's wide-flung municipalities.

Diaspora Judaism did and did not fit into this general picture. Like their pagan neighbors, Jews welcomed the interest of outsiders in their communities, permitting and even encouraging sympathetic Gentiles to participate in Jewish religious celebration, and to contribute to community charities, and to sponsor the construction of synagogue buildings. What set Judaism apart was its exclusiveness: alone of all of antiquity's cults, Judaism required exclusive devotion to its deity on the part of Jews themselves.

Although Jews made room for foreigners to worship Israel's god in Jerusalem's great temple until its destruction in 70, and in innumerable synagogues scattered throughout the Diaspora before and after the coming of Rome, they could not join pagan neighbors in the worship of foreign gods. This was a matter of Jewish principle. For this reason, Jews living abroad had to wrangle various concessions from civic authorities-permission not to appear in court on the Sabbath or on holy days, exemption from public rites when offering testimony-when participating in the social life of their cities of residence. And they alone were excused from active participation in the cults of the city and the empire.

Majority culture, in sum, tolerated Jewish religious difference; and this was so because of Judaism's antiquity and ethnicity. Respect for ancestral tradition ran so deep, and was so fundamental to the religious, political, and legal culture of the ancient Mediterranean, that cities were prepared to grant various exemptions from pagan civic cult to their Jewish residents on this same grounds: Jews, too, should honor their own ancestral customs, *ta patria ethe*, even if this meant not honoring the city's own gods. Thus, though some hostile pagan observers considered Jewish exclusivism rude and even seditious, the good will of the majority generally prevailed. Quite remarkably, it extended even to the point of

acknowledging the special status of former pagans who, as converts to Judaism, sought the same rights and exemptions as “native” Jews.

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CHRISTIANITY INHERITED ITS theological exclusivism directly from Judaism. But as its ethnic base shifted and, in some communities, its distance from the synagogue grew, problems accrued. Gentiles began to join fledgling churches in significant numbers, and they ceased to worship the gods native to their own culture. In other words, these Gentile Christians acted as if they had the religious prerogatives of Diaspora Jews, though they did not convert to Judaism. But as members of anew movement they lacked precisely what legitimated Jewish non-participation in cult: ancestral tradition. To their pagan neighbors, these Christian Gentiles were betraying their common religious patrimony, the *mos maiarum*, or “traditions of the fathers:” Worse: by deserting the traditions of their own fathers, they angered the gods who were theirs by birth and blood.

Little wonder that the gods were angry; and when the gods were angry, humans paid the price. Thus “if the Tiber overflows or the Nile doesn’t,” as the late second-century church father Tertullian complained; if plague struck, or famine, or earthquake, “all at once the cry goes up: ‘the Christian to the lion!’ ” Sitting targets for local anxieties, Gentile Christians who would not sacrifice to propitiate the gods could find themselves sacrificed instead.

In this first phase, anti-Christian persecution was as random, sporadic, and local as the different disasters that might spark it. But in the crisis of the third century, disaster was pandemic; and so, accordingly, were attempts to halt it. Thus in an unprecedented move, the emperor Decius in 250 mandated universal participation in public cult for all citizens of the empire. (In keeping with long-established legal tradition and social practice, Jews and thus Jewish Christians--were exempt.) Decius did not forbid the practice of Christianity’. He simply wanted to enroll all he could in a renewed effort to persuade the gods to protect Rome once again.

Christian responses varied. Many found ways to avoid, or to finesse, or to justify conforming to the emperor’s edict. Others defied it, and some of these dissenters were martyred. For the next several decades, occasional imperial efforts to coerce religious conformity would set off another round of persecutions. By 284, however, when the general Diocletian seized power and imposed order on the battered empire, these cycles of internal violence seem to have subsided.

This was why, in 303, Diocletian's decision-after nearly t\vent)' years of domestic peace-to enact a new and specifically anti-Christian policy caught everyone off guard. The staccato composition of these edicts panicked his Christian subjects, choked the prison system, and caused widespread confusion. Diocletian's pagan subjects, disgusted and alienated by the violence, themselves risked imprisonment and loss of property' in order to shelter Christian fugitives. A surge in pagan sympathy for Christianity was one social result of his ill-starred policy. And there was also an important political result, argues Drake. It was Constantine's decision, in 312, to convert to the cross.

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IT IS IN his discussion of Constantine-not of the emperor's psychological inner state or personal spirituality, but of the practical problems that he faced and the ways in which his allegiance to the church both solved and compounded them-that the virtue of Drake's commitment to political analysis becomes abundantly clear. Constantine was one of four contenders for sole power once Diocletian quit the scene. He faced a crowded field in which some of his rivals had already struck deals by forming coalitions with groups of Christians. By allying himself in such a novel way with the Christian God, Constantine outflanked his competition, and acquired a new constituency (this particular Christian population was a minority in the empire as a whole, but it was strongly concentrated in the cities), and initiated a new imperial effort at religious unity-within-diversity-namely, state support of a non-specific monotheism. Becoming a Christian enabled Constantine to build new and stabilizing urban coalitions across the pagan/Christian divide, thereby healing the injuries of near civil war that Diocletian's persecution inflicted. He pursued, in a novel way, a domestic policy of unity and peace.

Despite the undeniable novelty of his particular religious choice, Constantine's new policy rested upon two of the most ancient and traditional of imperial Roman religio-political concepts: the idea that heaven underwrote the well-being of the empire, and the idea that the emperor himself was representative of this relationship and responsible for its maintenance. Seen in this light, evidence that otherwise seems to point to personal hypocrisy or compromise-coins (antiquity's "sound bites," Drake nicely calls them) representing the emperor in profile with the Sun God, or Constantine and his sons' receiving victors' crowns from a non-specific hand from heaven - bespeaks instead a deliberate effort to craft a stable

political coalition of pagan and Christian (and, though Drake fails to factor them in, Jewish) monotheists committed to Constantine, his dynasty, and his peace.

This perspective makes sense also of Constantine's bark-but-virtually-no-bite pronouncements against traditional polytheists, Jews, and other Christian groups ("heretics") whom the bishops, the hard right ideologues of his new constituency, condemned. A skilled politician, Constantine placated and neutralized these extremists by stealing their rhetoric. And by prohibiting public (though not private) blood sacrifices-which were a future of traditional polytheist worship since time immemorial and, owing to the decades of anti-Christian persecutions from Decius to Diocletian, its particular symbol Constantine created for government and society a religiously neutral public space.

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THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH had been a political actor well before the conversion of Constantine, as the shift in public sentiment caused by Diocletian's policy of persecution revealed. What changed after 312 was the emergence of the bishops as power players. The bishops were distributed throughout the cities of the empire, and linked across vast spaces by their commitment to "party unity." They were in constant contact with their Own urban power base (the laity), and long experienced in organizing opinion and administering resources. Thus they represented a new and enormous pool of administrative talent.

Constantine, disgusted and frustrated by the clogged and corrupt mechanisms of imperial governance, turned gladly to this new cadre of talented men. The enormous resources of goods and power that he made available to the episcopacy, as Drake reveals, was not an ill-conceived lurching on the part of a theology-besotted monarch, but a deliberate and bold effort to create in the bishops an alternative judiciary free of the material biases that plagued and paralyzed "the system." And by using the bishops to distribute newly available imperial largesse, Constantine gained a huge and relatively efficient welfare system.

So what wrong? As Drake presents it, Constantine, by ceding so much to the bishops, lost control of the agenda.

Owing to their situation at the nodes of urban power independent of the emperor and not accountable to him, and owing to the longevity of their tenure (government agents, by contrast, regularly and frequently rotated in and out of

office) and to their intimate contact with their flocks (or, less piously, their urban power base), the bishops were too powerful to be mere pawns in an imperial game. They had a program of their own. Constantine's initiatives served only to enhance their power.

Committed to ideological purity--or, as they saw it, theological truth--of a very narrow sort, these men had their own ideas about the pursuit of unity. Constantine wanted to use the bishops as one foundation of his empire-wide coalition of monotheists, but the bishops wanted to use him. They wanted him, first of all, to settle issues of internal cohesion. That is, they wanted the emperor to enforce party discipline. And to gain their cooperation, Constantine had to oblige. Thus the very first victims of the new Christian government were other Christians--in the view of the bishops, "false" Christians, or heretics.

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IN 361, ALMOST twenty-five years after Constantine had gone to his reward, his nephew Julian subjected this whole improvised imperial-ecclesiastical "system" to an intolerable degree of torque. Renouncing the orthodox Christianity in which he had been raised, Julian publicly and energetically embraced traditional polytheism. He revoked many of the perquisites so freely given to the church by Constantine and his sons. This was bad enough; but worst of all in the eyes of the bishops, he issued a proclamation of universal religious tolerance. Back from exile came all the heretical bishops; out popped their previously suppressed supporters. Deprived of imperial muscle, orthodox bishops could not enforce their views. Chaos reigned. By this one simple act, Julian proved what the orthodox themselves had always maintained: that tolerance and Christianity -- "true," orthodox Christianity -- were incompatible.

Julian died on a campaign in 363. His successor, a Christian scrambling to consolidate his own position, promptly set about trying to put things right. The orthodox bishops roared back with a vengeance. Unconflictedly re-embracing power, they likewise embraced coercion: tolerance, as they saw it, was a creed for losers. By century's end, equipped with paramilitary bands of roving monks and urban "hospital workers," the bishops enforced their own views on religious unity, while the enormous spiritual prestige of the monks legitimated their resort to violence. As the power brokers of the new Roman state religion, they conferred legitimacy (as once the now-impotent Senate had) on the emperor who met with their approval. State and church were now on the same page. They

embarked on a new period of cooperation and religious commitment. And the rest, as they say, is history.

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WITH LASER-KEEN insight, bold thinking, and also a large measure of wry humor, Drake has presented a plausible and powerful interpretation of this formative moment in Western history. His notion that social processes should be analyzed not theologically but politically serves to make sense of much of the bewildering mass of evidence from this period. And it is delightful to see how wildly anachronistic television-pundit terms ("game," "power players," "hard-right;" and so on) provide, when they are shrewdly applied, valuable explanatory purchase on some of the steepest slopes of the past.

Most of Drake's big book keeps resolutely focused on the seesaw of pagan-Christian relations in the fourth century.

What he gains in argumentative clarity, however, he loses somewhat in the historical fidelity of some of his characterizations. The shortfall affects his portrait of all three groups of ancient actors: pagans, Jews, and Christians.

To the pagans first. Drake interrupts his discussion of groups and politics to pitch a surprisingly unpersuasive description of the nature of religious change. The terms turn suddenly psychological as he presents religion as a response to "needs;" and religious change as the index of new "needs." And what are those needs? "A growing interest in personal salvation;" a desire for more immediate and less impersonal deities. Already in the second century, he writes, individuals "were restlessly seeking answers that civic religion could not provide." "A sentiment of personal religion, a search for the afterlife" was on the rise. And so on.

Drake carefully asserts that Christianity was a beneficiary, not a cause, of this new sentiment. Still, the whole digression unhappily recalls the pious explanations of yesteryear, according to which paganism, which was ritual, public, and exterior, ceded to Christianity, which was personal, warmly communal, and interior. More simply, Christianity "won" because it was a better religion. Paganism simply ran out of gas.

As explanations go, this one does not go very far. For a start, it misdescribes paganism, which was never a single phenomenon but a thick farrago of practices

and beliefs. The civic cult's stately ceremonies, and the political liturgies of emperor worship, were never designed for close, personal connection with a deity. For such spiritual satisfactions, one went elsewhere: to Penates (family deities) and revered ancestors; to the nearly infinite variety of sublunar demons and spirits; to gods of individual locales--a brook, a tree, a glade; to personal manifestations of the holy in dreams. Domestic divinities crowded the pagan household. (Christian preachers made easy fun of such homely beliefs, lampooning newlyweds' frantic search for some nuptial privacy amid groups of schmoozing gods gathered to bless the new conjugal union.) If and when pagans wanted a more personal sort of religious experience than state or city could offer, they had plenty of options to hand. Moreover, paganism did not go quietly into the good night of imperially enforced Christianity. Barraged by legislation enjoining seizure of property, physical intimidation, and exile, pagans went underground, leaving a trail of martyrs of their own.

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THE JEWS ARE largely absent from Drake's picture, and this is too bad, because they afford a useful comparison with their Christian contemporaries. Drake briefly mentions both communities together when he considers how both were "exclusive" in their religious demands for insiders, and thus "intolerant" of outsiders; and he goes on to note how such postures can foster social actions such as persecution (the attempt to prevent the variant belief from existing) and coercion (the attempt to compel conformity). But Jews outside of their own land had long since made their peace, religiously and socially, with their non-Jewish neighbors, who were, after all, the vast majority of humankind. Intolerant of variety within the fold--battling with each other over the correct way to be Jewish is a timeless Jewish activity--Jews were in fact extremely tolerant of those outside the fold. The Jewish habit of receiving non-committed Gentiles into synagogue life drove later Christian spokesmen to distraction, especially if some of the Gentiles strolling in were no longer pagan, but Christian. Commodian chided Jews for allowing pagans to ccelebrate ("they ought to tell you whether it is right to worship the gods"). John Chrysostom, dreading the onslaught of the High Holidays in 387, browbeat his congregation to let go of Rosh Hashanah and the fast of Yom Kippur: "Don't you see if their [the Jews'] way of life is true, then ours must be false?"

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THIS BRINGS US, finally, to the Christians. If Christians had been more like Jews, they would have better tolerated pagans; but they did not tolerate pagans. And if Christians had been less like Jews, they would have better tolerated other Christians; but they did not tolerate other Christians. Nowhere does Christianity more clearly reveal its Jewishness than in its intolerant response to its own diversity. This was true from the very beginning, clearly present in the earliest strata of evidence available in the New Testament.

In his letters, from the middle of the first century, Paul fulminates against “so-called apostles;” “super-apostles,” and “deceitful workers;” by whom he means other Jews like himself who were also apostles to Gentiles preaching salvation in Christ. The problem, in Paul’s view, was that the Gospel that they preached was different from his own, which was enough to make it false. Similarly, in the Gospel of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, the showcase of the much-praised injunctions to love one’s enemies and to turn the other cheek, Jesus levels a withering blast at false insiders-that is, at other Christians:

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord;” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven. On that day [the final Day of the Lord] many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you: depart from me, you evildoers.”

The Johannine epistles make the same case with more economy: Christians who share the views of the writer are “of God,” and those who do not are “not of God”: “Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.”

Different interpretations of the Christian message only increased with time. By the middle of the second century, titanic

battles raged between various groups over such fundamental questions as the status of Jewish scriptures, the relationship between Christ and the High God, his father, to material creation, and the nature of Christ’s earthly- body. The scope for argument was seemingly limitless, and feeling ran high. As the late-second-century pagan Celsus observed, Christians “slander one another with dreadful and unspeakable abuse. And they make not even the least concession to reach agreement; for they utterly detest each other.” Even in the heat of the Decian persecutions, orthodox teachers warned their flocks not to consort with other prisoners if those others were only “so-called” Christians, or members of a

different Christian sect. Neither death, nor the moral fortitude required to refuse to worship the emperor, nor common suffering in witness to Christ could close the ideological gap. The heretic remained the child of Satan.

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HOW SHOCKING IS it, then, that the Church persecuted other Christians as soon as it could? The language of hate, the ethic of exclusion and excision, had co-existed from the beginning with the language of forbearance and the ethic of love: their relation was simultaneous, not sequential. But lacking the ethnic glue that kept the quarreling Jews together, Christians of various persuasions vilified each other with abandon. And once the commonwealth was Christian, the newly empowered bishops availed themselves of a much more ancient--and scripturally warranted--Jewish paradigm for handling pagan non-believers: the prophets' destruction of "dumb images" and their worshippers when purging the land of false gods.

When imperial troops closed down pagan temples in North Africa in 399, no one could doubt, said Augustine, that this was done *secundum veritatem propheticam*, "according to prophetic truth."

Ironically, the one island of relative safety for religious outsiders remained the synagogue. Jews, like everyone else, could be the occasional targets of mob violence; but Roman law generally obtained, and Judaism--unlike paganism or heresy was never outlawed. Augustine even argued (probably in the same year that saw the destruction of the pagan temples) that any Christian monarch attempting to force the Jews to give up their Law would fall under the sevenfold curse by which God long ago had protected Cain. He extended no such theological protection to others.

The gospels of the Church Triumphant themselves depicted a Jesus who wore ritual fringes (the *tzitzit* commanded in Numbers), worshipped in the synagogue on the Sabbath and in Jerusalem on the great pilgrimage holidays, and advised his followers on the correct size of their phylacteries (*tefillin*). More: the Jewish scriptures enjoining and praising fidelity to Jewish law were, as the Old Testament, a part of this church's own canon. Perhaps these facts, too, were sufficient to make most Christians most of the time feel squeamish about persecuting Jews. In any case, for this period and for a long time after, it was safer to be a Jew than a heretic or a pagan.

Drake concludes his study by noting that “this has not been a cheerful story, and it does not have a happy ending.’ He is right. But it is a riveting story, and masterfully told. Anyone who rejoices in our Founding Fathers’ constitutional conviction that church must be kept separate from state will read Constantine and the Bishops with deepest appreciation; and perhaps those who long for the opposite should read it, too. The lessons of late antiquity remain pertinent, alas, to the politics of religion in our own day.