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# The Origins of the Christian State

GERALD BRAY

## Introduction

To understand the rise of a Christian state in the late Roman Empire,<sup>1</sup> it is necessary to start by taking a brief look at the situation which obtained during the three centuries in which the church suffered intermittent persecution before receiving legal recognition.

The relationship between Christianity and the state goes back to the lifetime of Jesus himself. It is St Luke who records for us the circumstances which forced Joseph and Mary to make their way to Bethlehem. They were forced to be counted and taxed in the great census initiated by the Emperor Augustus. There is a good deal of controversy about the date of this event,<sup>2</sup> but one thing is perfectly clear. As far as St Luke was concerned, the Roman state was providentially used of God to provide the occasion for the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.

Nowadays it is generally recognized that, of all the New Testament writers, St Luke had the most positive appreciation of the empire and its potential as an instrument in the service of the gospel. It is he who tells us that St Paul was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:26–28), and he who lays such emphasis on the appeal to Caesar and the hazardous journey to Rome. Paul himself never did this sort of thing; he boasts of his pure Jewish ancestry, not of his Roman citizenship,<sup>3</sup> and writes to the Romans in a spirit which hardly suggests that he was aware of the city's importance as the centre of the civilized world. His injunctions to obey the state authorities are vague and might be applied to anyone; there is certainly no hint that Rome had a special place in the divine economy, or that secular rulers were somehow expected to acknowledge the claims of Christ.

In contrast to the positive approach of St Luke, there stands the witness of St John the Divine, who paints a picture of Rome so unflattering as to provoke the most serious questions as to whether the church is meant to have any dealings with the state at all. Even when the difficulties of typology and the hyperbole of apocalyptic are accounted for, it would be difficult to deny that St John regarded Rome as the standard-bearer of all the earthly powers which were in rebellion against the kingdom of God.

The ambiguity of the New Testament witness to the role of the state is one which has continued through history, and which is probably an inevitable consequence of a religion whose followers are

called to be 'in the world, but not of the world'. Its effects on the life of the church are apparent from the beginning, and can be traced through the developments leading up to official recognition in the fourth century.

On the one hand, there is the transparent patriotism of a man like Tertullian, who in writing to the martyrs reminds them not of biblical or Christian heroes, but of the virtues of the pagan Romans in whose footsteps the martyrs have been obliged to follow. Athenagoras of Athens, writing about 176, addresses his apology for Christianity to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the man who in the following year unleashed the first systematic persecution of the church.

On the other hand, there is the cult of the martyrs, already apparent in the book of Revelation<sup>4</sup> and functioning in embryonic form by the late second century. Victims of persecution received such honour that when official recognition was finally granted, sections of the North African and Egyptian churches went into schism, partly on the ground that the Great Church had compromised itself by entering into an alliance with the Antichrist.

It is difficult to draw a balanced picture of this period, but the main facts appear to be the following. First, Christianity came under suspicion because it was a *religio illicita*. We need not concern ourselves with whether or not it was described as a *religio*, as opposed to a *superstitio* or a *collegium*; it is the *illicita* which is important. This word does not mean *illegal* in the modern sense, but something more akin to *unregistered*. The Roman legal system could not cope with a phenomenon of which it was officially ignorant, which is why there was such uncertainty about the charges to be made against Christians.<sup>5</sup> They could quite easily be punished, especially if they were not Roman citizens, but the legal grounds for this remained unclear, a fact which was duly exploited by Tertullian and others, who argued that persecution was an absurdity.

The second fact to be taken into account is that the church never developed any lasting hostility to the state. Their apologists argued for toleration within the existing order, not for revolution. There was no Christian equivalent of the Jewish zealots, and no suggestion of armed resistance to the state. The soldier's calling was usually regarded as unsuitable for the Christian, because he was forbidden to kill, but there is little evidence to suggest that Christians in the army were looked down upon in any way, or asked to leave.<sup>6</sup> Their biggest problem was the oath of allegiance, which they could not make to an emperor who had pretensions to divinity. Yet it is worth remembering that the only time a Christian force is recorded as having fought, it is as a special 'thundering' legion which miraculously saved the empire from its barbarian enemies.<sup>7</sup> It does not matter that the story is legendary; its tone and emphasis indicate a fundamentally positive attitude toward the state on the part of the persecuted minority of believers.

In the third century a number of factors combined to change the situation radically. At the intellectual level, the work of Tertullian and Origen put Christians on a par with pagans, if indeed they did not surpass them in brilliance. In 212 Roman citizenship was granted to all free men in the empire, a move which immediately brought the majority of Christians under the relative protection of the law. By the middle of the century the imperial order was visibly collapsing and, in the years of chaos and turmoil, paganism and the cult of the emperor's genius suffered a great loss of prestige. At the same time, the church was winning converts on a mass scale, especially in the eastern provinces, and its latent power could no longer be ignored.

Persecution was renewed in 251 under the Emperor Decius, and lasted for about ten years. It was savage in places, and left a deep scar on the church's self-consciousness, which surfaced in the bitter feelings over the repentance of those who had recanted under pressure. The prominence of this issue has unfortunately obscured other salient facts which need to be remembered if we are to get a balanced picture. In 261 the Emperor Gallienus decreed a respite, and allowed Christians to regain possession of their buildings and cemeteries.<sup>8</sup> Possessions of this kind would not have been easily concealed, and it seems certain that the church was operating more or less in the open well before 251.

Confirmation of this comes from Syria, where Zenobia, the Queen of Palmyra, was able to capture Antioch in 270 and hold it for twelve years. Her agent in the city was none other than its Christian bishop, the notorious Paul of Samosata, who combined civil with ecclesiastical jurisdiction for the first time. Paul was condemned for heresy in 268, but he could not be deposed until the city was recaptured by the Emperor Aurelian in 272. The leading Christians of the time thanked the emperor for helping the church in this way, and it appears that Aurelian added the figure of Christ to his official pantheon.<sup>9</sup>

When the Great Persecution began under Diocletian, it was the church building next to the imperial residence at Nicomedia which was the first to be closed and razed to the ground (13 February 303).<sup>10</sup> Clearly such a building would never have existed without official connivance at least, nor would the purge of Christian officials have been noticed if they were neither prominent nor numerous. The Church of Diocletian's time was obviously a much more serious potential threat—or ally—than it had been in the days of Marcus Aurelius, or even of Decius.

Diocletian's efforts were unsuccessful, and his successor Maximin was forced to embark on a campaign to discredit Christianity by such devices as the public exhibition of forged diaries, attributed to Christ and the apostles.<sup>11</sup> Such activities were clearly the fruit of the counsel of despair, and the edifice of the state soon began to crack open. On 30 April 311, the Emperor Galerius granted Christians a measure of

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toleration, motivated, as he himself says, by the frustration of his attempts to woo them back to paganism.<sup>12</sup>

Attempts were, of course, made to undo the Edict of Galerius, and persecution occurred under rival emperors until the defeat and death of Licinius in 324. But after 311 there was always somewhere in the Roman Empire where Christians were legally tolerated.

## Constantine

This in brief was the position which Constantine the Great inherited when, after his vision of a flaming cross in the sky on the night of 27 October 312, he entered Rome with a victorious army, bearing the chi-rho symbol of Christ on its shields. There has been endless discussion about the nature of Constantine's conversion, and it is now fairly customary to dismiss it as more superstitious than theological.<sup>13</sup> This is quite possibly true, but the accusation misses the point. Constantine, for whatever reason, saw in Christianity the power which had given him victory and this attracted him to it. His personal beliefs are of secondary importance. What really matters is what he did for the church and came to expect of it, and what Christians in turn came to expect, or to fear, from an emperor who professed to be on their side.

Early in 313 Constantine and his co-emperor Licinius issued an Edict of Toleration at Milan,<sup>14</sup> which made religion a matter for the individual conscience to decide. Licinius later went back on this, but Constantine made it a cornerstone of his religious policy for the rest of his life. In addition to this, the edict decreed the restoration of property which had been illegally seized, not merely from individual Christians but from the corporation(s) of the *church*, which is further evidence that the church must have owned considerable amounts of property long before this date. The Edict of Milan is the first document to refer to the church as a legal entity, or corporation, though here again the tone of the language suggests that it had been regarded as such for some time. Roman law was as yet uncodified and more susceptible to customary usage than it would be later on. It is important to notice that corporation status appears to have belonged to the local congregation, not to the diocese or the church as a whole, though this is not clearly stated in the edict.

Following hard on the Edict of Milan came a number of other measures designed to improve the church's position. Christian clergy were to be paid out of state funds and exempted from public office,<sup>15</sup> which meant, in practice, a considerable improvement in their financial status. These privileges were, of course, granted only to the 'Catholic' clergy; heretical groups were not mentioned. This meant that the state was in effect offering financial inducements to the clergy to remain within the Great Church. In North Africa, where the Donatist schism broke out at the very moment that these concessions

were achieved, Constantine's measures had direct political and ecclesiastical significance. At first the Donatists were prepared to take their case to the emperor, but when they lost it (in 316), they became mortal enemies of the empire, denouncing the new church-state relationship as an ungodly compromise. Constantine responded by renewed persecution, which only strengthened the conviction of the Donatists, and they were eventually allowed a grudging toleration but no privileges (321).<sup>16</sup>

The struggle against Donatism appears to have hardened Constantine's attitude and to have enmeshed him more directly in church affairs. As late as 321 he could still proclaim Sunday a day of rest without giving an explicitly religious reason,<sup>17</sup> but by the time he renewed his Edict of Toleration in 324, his tone had become consciously pro-Christian (i.e. pro-Catholic).<sup>18</sup> In 326 heretics and schismatics were deprived of their immunities,<sup>19</sup> and on 11 May 330 he dedicated the city of Constantinople to be a consciously Christian capital of the empire. These moves reached their culmination about 333, when the works of the pagan philosopher Porphyry and the heretic theologian Arius were both officially proscribed.<sup>20</sup>

Constantine's involvement in the internal affairs of the church is much harder to assess. After 324 his somewhat neutral attitude became an 'us and them' relationship, with Constantine placing himself squarely on the side of the Great Church. On the other hand, he apparently regarded himself as the 'bishop of those without' (*episkopos tōn ektos*),<sup>21</sup> a position which was confirmed in the panegyric pronounced by Eusebius of Caesarea at the celebration which marked the thirtieth anniversary of his coming to power (336).<sup>22</sup> Eusebius maintained that the emperor was the vice-regent of God, whose duty it was, first, to develop his own spiritual understanding and awareness of his high calling, and then to shepherd those outside the church in such a way that they would be compelled to hear the proclamation of the gospel. To this end, all the resources of the state should be directed, and the use of force to coerce heretics was explicitly commended.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, there is no suggestion that the emperor had any responsibility for determining the content of orthodox belief. Constantine accepted the decisions of the Council of Nicaea in 325, which he had convoked and over which he had presided, but he himself states that the results were the work of the bishops, who were inspired by God and not cajoled by the state.<sup>24</sup> This happy situation would not obtain at every council, but there is no reason to suppose that it was not true at Nicaea.

The council condemned Arianism but failed to extirpate it, and in a letter which the emperor sent to Athanasius in 328, the year of his elevation to the see of Alexandria, he warned the bishop against a policy of excluding heretics from the worship services of the church.<sup>25</sup>

Here we see the first signs of a conflict of interests between church and state which would not be resolved until the seventh century, and then only in the most drastic manner. The church wanted to preserve the purity of its faith; the emperor wanted to keep his empire intact. Ecclesiastical conflicts had divided the populace of several provinces, and a state which was too closely allied to the Great Church was practically inviting rebellion. As a result, imperial policy was modified in the direction of a compromise which would allow both orthodox and Arian Christians equal freedom within the one church. As this could only be done by changing or by reinterpreting the Creed of Nicaea, Constantine found himself plunged into theological debate. Eusebius of Caesarea, whose personal sympathies were semi-Arian, shared the emperor's views, and this explains the close association between them towards the end of Constantine's life. The rigorist Athanasius was exiled in 336, the year before Constantine died, and this event, more than any other, signalled the emergence of an imperial policy in church affairs distinguishable from the views of the champions of strict Nicene orthodoxy.

The reign of Constantine the Great was of crucial significance for the development of church-state relations, but it must always be remembered that it was the beginning of a development which did not come to fruition for another two generations. Constantine moved only slowly from a position of open sympathy for the church to one of interference in ecclesiastical affairs, and subsequent developments would demonstrate just how fluid the situation in 337 still was. Eusebius of Caesarea's oration, extolling the virtues of a Christian emperor, was more of an ideal than a practical statement of the constitutional position.

We have seen that Constantine moved only slowly to put paganism at a disadvantage, and even Christian heretics might have been left alone if they had been less disruptive. He retained his title of Pontifex Maximus, and left the pagan rites undisturbed, making few moves to substitute Christian festivities in their place. Partly this was probably due to Christian reluctance to take over pagan ceremonies and 'baptize' them; partly it must have been the weight of Roman tradition, powerful among the aristocracy, which held him back. Yet the position of tolerance which he tried to maintain could not in the long term have been any more than a transitional measure. A secular or pluralistic state, in the circumstances, would have been neither conceivable nor possible.

The reasons for this lie partly in the Roman constitution and partly in the fundamental difference between paganism and Christianity. Roman religion is paralleled in the modern world only by Shinto in Japan. It was a secular cult of the home, the family, the city and the emperor who was generally thought to be divine.<sup>26</sup> Like Shinto, it could tolerate other religions, and many Romans belonged to

mystery cults or philosophical societies without feeling any pangs of conscience. Christianity, however, imposed an exclusiveness which denied the Roman cult without replacing it. It could not absorb the state apparatus into its worship, and the emperor was a 'non-person' as far as its theology was concerned. On the other hand, a Christian emperor could not continue to claim divine status or take part in the civic rites. But if he refused to do so, the state religion could only collapse, its keystone having been removed. In a day and age when most people believed that the state required divine protection for its well-being, a religious vacuum of this kind was a political impossibility.<sup>27</sup>

This was the dilemma which confronted Constantine and his successors. Somehow they had to assimilate Christianity without destroying the foundations of their state. The importance of this task can be measured by the reaction of the surviving pagans to the sack of Rome in 410. Even at that late date they put the blame for the disaster on the abandonment of the old gods, an accusation which prodded Augustine into writing his *City of God* in refutation. In the end the church, too, realized that it could only find security in the Roman state by taking it over and restructuring the constitution to allow each organ to function according to its proper nature. Whether it succeeded in this aim may be doubted, but the purpose of imperial edicts and ecclesiastical canons became increasingly clear as the impermanence of the original Constantinian settlement grew more obvious.

### **From Constantius II to Theodosius I**

Constantine was succeeded by his son Constantius II in 337. Constantius immediately rescinded the ban on Athanasius, and by 341 was trying to outlaw pagan rites. At first he did not attempt to close the temples, but eventually that too became one of his stated aims.<sup>28</sup> The effects of his policy were short-lived, however. Pagan worship appears to have continued more or less untouched, and even Athanasius was soon in exile once more. Before long Constantius was back to the position he had inherited from his father. His mild support for the semi-Arians earned him the title of 'forerunner of the Antichrist'<sup>29</sup> and this time there was no Eusebius to put his case to the church.

When Constantius died in 361 his ecclesiastical policy had reached an impasse, with neither the semi-Arians nor the orthodox able to compromise or to suppress the other. His successor, Julian the Apostate, tried to resolve the issue by curtailing the special status which had been granted to Christians by the Edict of Milan and subsequent legislation. Christians were forbidden to teach the pagan classics, and the immunity from public service granted to the clergy was withdrawn.<sup>30</sup> Athanasius was exiled yet again, and spent nearly a



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year in hiding, while the still largely pagan Roman aristocracy enjoyed the limelight once more.

It all lasted barely two years. In June 363 Julian was killed fighting against the Persians. His successor, Jovian, immediately plumped for orthodox Nicene Christianity, and his successor, Valentinian I (364–75), restored the toleration of earlier times. Meanwhile, in 360, church property had been exempted from taxation, a decree which seems never to have been revoked, even by Julian. The so-called pagan restoration had been little more than the private enthusiasm of a single man. As emperor he could cause a lot of anxiety, but the church was now too strong to be touched by the state in any serious way. Christians who had been forbidden to teach the pagan classics merely sat down and wrote Christian epics and histories; they certainly did not stop teaching! About all that Julian achieved was that he put in sharp focus the need to Christianize the state as soon and as completely as possible. The freedom of the church could never again be entrusted to the whims of dynastic succession.

By 378 the church was claiming the right to administer its internal affairs, as well as legal immunity for the bishop of Rome, at least.<sup>31</sup> It obtained the former, but not the latter of these requests from the Emperor Gratian (375–83). Also in 378, the semi-Arian Emperor Valens was killed at Adrianople, ironically by the Arian Goths. This removed the last obstacle to the proclamation of Nicene orthodoxy as the state religion, which followed in the Edict of Theodosius I (378–95), dated 28 February 380. This edict established the trinitarian orthodoxy of Rome and Alexandria as the official norm, and proscribed heretical forms of Christianity.<sup>32</sup> Paganism was not mentioned until 391, when another edict effectively suppressed temple worship.<sup>33</sup>

From that time temples were systematically destroyed or converted into churches, pagan festivals like the Olympic Games were suppressed, and the pagan priesthood lost its remaining privileges. Pagans were barred from the imperial service in 408<sup>34</sup> and excluded entirely from the army and from government in 415.<sup>35</sup> Mobs acting in the name of the church, occasionally even incited by itinerant monks, murdered leading pagans and plundered their property. In 423 it was necessary to issue an edict giving protection to pagans and Jews, both of whom were now effectively excluded from participation in affairs of state.<sup>36</sup> In little more than a century the wheel had turned full circle.

During the same period, relations between the emperor and the church underwent a number of subtle changes which were eventually to produce a new symbiosis of temporal and spiritual power. After Constantine, no emperor, not even Julian, could stay out of church affairs. Emperors regularly called and attended church councils, whose decrees had to receive imperial sanction if they were to be put

into effect. The claim of Constantine to be 'bishop of those without' came to be employed by Theodosius I as a reason for participating in church affairs and for exercising a practical veto over decisions made by the bishops.

At the First Council of Constantinople in 381, the third canon raised the city to second place in the order of sees. Constantinople, as the new Rome, was to take precedence over all but the see of the ancient capital. The motive here was quite clearly political, and Rome always feared that its loss of political importance would eventually lead to a corresponding loss of ecclesiastical prestige. The fear was a real one. The western emperors of the time usually resided at Milan, whose Bishop Ambrose was certainly the most formidable cleric of his age.

Ambrose had been a layman until 373, when pressure from the citizens of Milan persuaded him to give up his post as governor of Aemilia-Liguria and become their bishop. That a top civil servant could be attracted by such a call is evidence enough of how the balance of power was shifting from the state to the church. Once installed as bishop, Ambrose embarked on a career which led him to numerous confrontations with the emperors. His crowning achievement came in 390, when he was able to force Theodosius to do penance for the massacre of the citizens of Thessalonica. No bishop of Rome wielded such power; at Constantinople it was out of the question. When John Chrysostom, for example, rebuked the empress Eudoxia for her luxurious living, it was he who was deposed, not the emperor (403).

The career of Ambrose was a remarkable one, and undoubtedly owed much to his commanding personality, as well as to the political importance of his see. It demonstrated that the church could wield considerable power, especially when it had morality and public opinion on its side, but it would be a mistake to regard Theodosius' penance as a capitulation of the state to the church on all fronts. As long as Roman administration remained intact, its officials maintained their independence and sense of *raison d'état* which operated either outside or with the blessing of the church. It was when the imperial government broke down and was not replaced, that the church began to move into the vacuum created in the temporal sphere.

### **The decline and fall of the first Christian empire**

On 31 December 406 Germanic tribes successfully breached the Roman defences along the Rhine. By 409 the Visigoths had overrun Spain, and the Vandals were approaching North Africa. Here and there isolated pockets of Roman rule survived, even beyond the collapse of the Western Empire in 476.<sup>37</sup> The fifth century was one of turmoil and uncertainty in Western Europe, with the church as the only institution which maintained a certain stability.

Premonition of what was to come, came in the famous sack of Rome in 410. As we have already mentioned, this led Augustine to write his *magnum opus*, *City of God*, in which he outlined a Christian understanding of world history. In the course of this study the bishop of Hippo arrived at an understanding of politics which went much deeper than that of Eusebius and most of his contemporaries.<sup>38</sup> Unlike them, he did not think that the Roman Empire was part of God's plan for the spread of the gospel. Rome, like other human powers, was a transitory state whose success came from a certain conformity to the will of God and whose collapse was due to its inherent sinfulness. In the Middle Ages, readers of Augustine were to draw the simple conclusion that all state power was of the devil, but he himself was never as crude as this. He understood that the earthly city, the kingdom of man's rebellion, was the product of inner forces at work in the human heart, which could be seen in the church as much as in the state. He did not deny that the visible church was the representation of the divine kingdom on earth, and was even prepared to use state power to compel heretics and schismatics to return to its bosom,<sup>39</sup> but he never denied its imperfections.

For Augustine, the power of the state could be used either for good or for evil. There was no neutral ground, and it was the duty of the church to ensure that this power was used in the right way. Without taking up the sword itself, the church was called to direct the affairs of state in ways which would be pleasing to God, yet at the same time to remember that the Christian had another city, whose builder and maker was God, not the Roman emperor.

This way of thinking became quite influential in ecclesiastical circles in the West long before it was transformed into official ideology. Pope Leo I used his moral prestige to ward off an attack by Attila the Hun (453), though he could not prevent the sack of Rome by the Vandal king Gaiseric two years later. A bishop like Sidonius Apollinarius of Clermont-Ferrand courageously defended his city against the Franks, though he surrendered when the rapidly disintegrating imperial government signed away the whole of Gaul in 475. Almost everywhere, bishops under barbarian rule became the spokesmen for the Catholic Roman population at the courts of their Arian or pagan rulers. In practice this meant that they were the acknowledged authority over 99 per cent of the population, and it is a notable fact that Roman aristocrats, many of whom were very late converts to Christianity, soon occupied most of the bishoprics, finding in them the outlet now no longer available in the service of the state.

The Western Church was further strengthened when the empire collapsed and the imperial insignia were sent to Constantinople. In theory the barbarian kings of the West ruled as vassals of the eastern emperor, whose representative, the pope, was commissioned to

confirm them in possession. After 476 the Roman Church was able to claim that the secular rulers depended on it for their legitimacy, a constitutional development which was to become political dogma in the Middle Ages. Non-Catholic rulers were not particularly impressed by this, but as Theodoric, who ruled Italy from 493 to 526 discovered, the good will of an Arian ruler towards a Catholic Church could not ensure stability. Sooner or later the heretical minority had to integrate itself into the majority culture, and this meant accepting the authority of Catholic bishops. Justinian managed to destroy the Ostrogoths and the Vandals before this process occurred, but it was complete among the Visigoths of Spain by the end of the sixth century.

More complex and delicate were the relations between Rome and Constantinople. To offset the decline of Rome as a political centre, its bishops began to press further the dormant claims of their apostolic see.<sup>40</sup> It was well known that Peter and Paul had both been martyred at Rome, and that Peter had been the city's first bishop, a tradition alluded to even in the Edict of Theodosius I (28 February 380). What this might mean in terms of ecclesiastical power, though, was far from clear. In 343 the Council of Sardica, representing the western bishops, had allowed the bishop of Rome jurisdiction in ecclesiastical disputes, but only if the latter were referred to him.<sup>41</sup> In doctrinal matters Rome was largely ignored until Cyril of Alexandria wrote asking for support against Nestorius (430). In the debates which followed, Rome played a full part, and the Tome of Pope Leo I, despatched on 13 June 449, formed the basis of the decisions taken two years later at Chalcedon.

The Council of Chalcedon marks the high point of Roman influence in the East, but the cost was schism between Constantinople and Alexandria. For a while the Emperor Marcian, who was pledged to uphold Chalcedon, tried to suppress dissent in Egypt, which he ruled, rather than provoke a breach with Rome, over which he had no effective control. His policy failed, and in 458 his successor Leo I (457–74) tried a new approach. He despatched a letter to the leading bishops and abbots of both East and West, asking their opinion on the Alexandrian question<sup>42</sup> and the possibility of revising Chalcedon.

We possess only a selection of replies to this Codex Encyclicus, but they all demonstrate an attitude to the empire and its sovereign which reflects a developed Eusebianism and which was to prove fatal to imperial unity. The respondents almost invariably thought of the church with Christ as its head, but with the emperor as its force and foundation.<sup>43</sup> Even more striking, the Petrine office claimed by the Roman bishop was not infrequently attached to the emperor, who on the basis of Proverbs 21:1 was even declared to be infallible.<sup>44</sup> The idea that he might be a heretic was not even considered. This might

have been all right had the emperor been recognized as the fount of doctrine, but he was not. His duty was to uphold the teaching of the councils, especially that of Nicaea. And of course it was precisely this issue, viz. whether Chalcedon should be upheld or not, which was dividing the church.

Leo I was no more successful than Marcian in bringing peace, but his successor Zeno (474–91) tried again.<sup>45</sup> In his *Henotikon* of 482, he attempted to reconcile both sides by demoting Chalcedon without repudiating it, and declaring Nicaea I and Constantinople I as sufficient for a definition of orthodoxy. This had some success in the East, but neither Rome nor the monks of Constantinople were prepared to accept a compromise. The pope excommunicated Patriarch Acadius, and the schism lasted until 519. It was finally healed by concession to Rome, which was then recognized as the final arbiter of doctrine in the empire.

In theory this might have produced an impossible situation, similar to that which had faced Marcian, but the new emperor Justin I (518–27) and his nephew Justinian I (527–65) were determined to reconquer the West. Roman troops re-entered their old capital in 536 and imperial control remained, though with diminishing effectiveness after 680, until the fall of Ravenna in 751. During this period, Rome was reintegrated into the imperial church system. Gregory the Great (590–604) might protest at the assumption of the title 'Occumenical' by the Patriarch of Constantinople, but he could do little about it. Justinian had already codified Roman law, happily taking over statutes which had originally been designed for the pagan cult and applying them to the Christian one instead.<sup>46</sup> He had also destroyed the last vestiges of paganism, the philosophical schools of Athens, which had been closed in 529.

In 638 Pope Honorius I was obliged to accept the *Ekthesis* of the Emperor Heraclius, which was yet another attempt to reconcile the Monophysites, even though it contained dubious doctrinal statements.<sup>47</sup> By that time, though, the imperial system was definitely cracking. After reconquering Italy, Justinian tried to reconcile the East, but to no avail. By the time he died in 565, his policy was in ruins, and the imperial government was persecuting the Monophysites as heretics. When Islam appeared on the scene, these latter threw off the Roman yoke with some relief and the problem of two centuries was solved—by amputation. Only the pro-Chalcedonian parts of the empire remained in Byzantine hands after 642, and this situation was never reversed.

In the West, a weakened Byzantium struggled against the pagan Lombards, who had occupied half of Italy in 568. Its control of Rome was still absolute in 653, when Pope Martin I was deported to Constantinople and condemned for high treason.<sup>48</sup> Not until 692 was Rome strong enough to offer successful resistance, this time to the

imposition of the Canons of the Synod *in Trullo* on the Western Church. The emperor ordered his troops to seize the pope, but they mutinied instead. As local recruits, they preferred to side with a fellow Italian against the Greek emperor, who appeared to be far away, impotent and wrong.

From then on, it was downhill all the way. When Leo III (717–41) introduced iconoclasm into his empire in 726, Pope Gregory II wrote to condemn his policy and welcomed the refugees instead. When Ravenna fell in 751, imperial power in Central Italy collapsed, and the pope allied himself to the Franks. These defeated and destroyed the Lombard kingdom in 754, giving the former Byzantine territories to the pope, who now became their temporal sovereign. From that time on, the Christian state in the West would appear as a papal creation, and a new historical era had begun. It did not give the church unimpeded authority; indeed, until the eleventh century, the church was much more subservient to state interests than it had been in Roman times. But the legal basis of its position was different, and it was this, not the Roman heritage, which gave medieval Europe its theocratic power. To be sure, the popes paraded the forged Donation of Constantine (composed about 850) as proof of the Roman origins of their power, but when the falseness of this claim was demonstrated (by Laurentius Valla in the fifteenth century), the discovery no longer shook the church. Constantine had become irrelevant in the struggle for power in Western Europe.

In the East, the old Roman idea of the Christian empire survived for many centuries longer. The emperors continued to control the administration of the church by appointing their own nominees to bishoprics, but in the moral and theological spheres, the boot was on the other foot. No emperor could profess heresy and live; even reunion with Rome, after the rupture caused by papal claims and the crusades, was a dangerous game to play.<sup>49</sup> Yet as late as 1438, Byzantine canonists maintained that the Emperor John VIII must be present and consent to the decrees of the Council of Florence if it was to be a valid ecumenical council, and it was he, not the patriarch, who with the pope, co-chaired the deliberations.<sup>50</sup>

This system perished with the empire (1453), only a more-or-less faithful approximation surviving in Russia and in the Balkans until modern times. The Constantinian Church perished with the state which had created it.

## **Retrospect**

Who was the chief beneficiary of the Christianization of the Roman Empire? In the nineteenth century, under the influence of Ritschl and Harnack, and even more in the twentieth, after the collapse of the great 'Christian' empires of Germany, Austria and Russia, it was widely believed that the church had been shackled by Constantine

and kept for sixteen centuries in a kind of bureaucratic slavery. Views which had previously belonged to fringe groups of millenarians and anabaptists now became semi-official teaching in many places. The gulf between the sacred and the secular has seldom been wider than it is at present, though it would be difficult to demonstrate that the church has received new strength from this separation. In many ways it would appear to be more confused and impotent than ever.

In considering the story of Rome, we must admit that the state frequently interfered in ecclesiastical affairs, and that its interventions were frequently disastrous. At the same time, there is little evidence that the state really ever imposed its will on the church for long. Egypt and Syria were in schism long before they were politically separated from Constantinople; it was a doctrinal dispute which split the empire, not an imperial edict which divided the church. But the evidence for the church's victory over the state comes from simple observation. In the East it is the Orthodox Church which maintains the Byzantine heritage in every aspect of its life. The emperors could return tomorrow and find themselves completely at home. In the West, it is the bishops who wear the imperial purple, and the pope who reigns in splendour from the Vatican whilst the imperial palace lies in ruins on the Palatine.

The subsequent history of Europe has introduced new factors into the equation, and church-state relations have known many ups and downs. At the moment, the relaxation of moral laws and similar phenomena make it appear that the church is losing out. This may be true on the surface, but the student of history will be slow to side with the state in the struggle for ultimate supremacy. The ghost of the Roman Empire suggests that the spiritual power will yet have the last word after all.

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### NOTES

- 1 Not, however, the first. This honour belongs to Armenia, which made Christianity the state religion in 301. For most of the period under discussion here, Armenia was a client-state of the Roman Empire, though after 506 it went into schism (Monophysitism) and was subsequently less affected by imperial policy. Temporary reunions were effected in 571 and 632, but although Armenian Monophysitism was modified in the direction of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, there was no permanent reconciliation.
- 2 See I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Paternoster Press, Exeter 1978), pp.97-104.
- 3 Even Luke portrays Paul as mentioning his Roman citizenship only when asked; the apostle never volunteered the information.

- 4 Rev. 6:9–11; 7:14–17; 12:10–11.
- 5 Neither Tacitus, *Annales*, XV, 44, 2–8, nor Pliny the Younger, *Epp.* X, 96–7, seems to have known what Christians might have been guilty of.
- 6 On this whole subject, see J. M. Hornus, *It is not Lawful for me to Fight* (Scottsdale, Pa 1980).
- 7 Eusebius, *HE*, V, 5, 1–4. For another positive assessment of the empire, see Melito of Sardis, *Apologia*.
- 8 *ibid.*, VII, 13.
- 9 *ibid.*, VII, 30, 19–21.
- 10 A. M. Ritter, *Die Einberufung des Konzils in seinem geschichtlich — lehrmassigen Zusammenhang*, p.31, in D. Papadreuou, ed., *Le Ile concile Occumenique* (Chambesy 1982).
- 11 Eusebius, *op. cit.*, IX, 5, 1.
- 12 Lactantius, *De mor pers.*, 34.
- 13 The most recent example of this is A. Kee, *Constantine versus Christ* (London 1982).
- 14 Lactantius, *op. cit.*, 48.
- 15 Eusebius, *op. cit.*, X, 6–7.
- 16 See W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford 1952).
- 17 Codex Theodosianus, II, 8, 1.
- 18 Eusebius, *VC*, II, 56.
- 19 Cod.Theod., XVI, 5, 1.
- 20 Socrates, *HE*, I, 9, 30–1; Gelasius, *HE*, II, 36.
- 21 Eusebius, *VC*, IV, 24.
- 22 *id.*, *Orat.*, 2, 5.
- 23 *ibid.*, 2, 3.
- 24 Socrates, *HE*, I, 9, 19–25.
- 25 Athanasius, *C.Ar.*, 59.
- 26 Though it took a long time for this idea to take root in the Latin world. See A. Grillmeier, *Auriga mundi*, in *Mit ihm und in ihm* (Freiburg im Breisgau 1975), pp.386–419.
- 27 *ibid.*, p.393.
- 28 Cod.Theod., XVI, 10, 2–4.
- 29 Athanasius, *Hist.Arian.*, 77.
- 30 Cod.Theod., XII, 1, 50.
- 31 PL, 13, 575ff.
- 32 Cod.Theod., XVI, 1, 2.
- 33 *ibid.*, XVI, 10, 10.
- 34 *ibid.*, XVI, 5, 42.
- 35 *ibid.*, XVI, 10, 21.
- 36 *ibid.*, XVI, 10, 24.
- 37 In Northern Gaul, the Roman general Syagrius held out until 486, whilst the semi-Roman British kingdom(s) were not overwhelmed until long after their Roman character had been effectively submerged in the native Celtic tradition.
- 38 Eusebius was followed by Diodore of Tarsus, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Jerome, and even Ambrose. Cf. A. Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, p.392.
- 39 Augustine, *Ep.*, 93.
- 40 This term was first used by Damasus, pope from 366 to 384.
- 41 Canon 3B (6).
- 42 The exact issue concerned the legitimacy of Timothy Aelurus' succeeding Proterius, the murdered imperial nominee, as bishop.
- 43 A. Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, p.397.
- 44 *ibid.*, pp.399, 405.
- 45 Zeno's policy followed that tried by the usurper Basiliscus (475–6). See A. Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, p.415.
- 46 e.g., Ulpian's statement about the right of the state to legislate for religious affairs



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(*Digest*, 1, 1, 1, 2) and his explanation of the interdict against unseemly behaviour in sacred places (*Digest*, 43, 6, 1).

- 47 It and Honorius were both condemned by the Third Council of Constantinople (680–1), much to Rome's enduring embarrassment.
- 48 He would have been executed, but for the intervention of the patriarch, who secured his exile in the Crimea, where he died in 654.
- 49 Four emperors, Michael VIII (1258–82), John V (1341–53; 1354–76; 1379–91), John VIII (1425–48) and Constantine XI (1448–53) made *personal* professions of loyalty to Rome. None carried his subjects with him.
- 50 J. Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge 1959, reprinted 1982 with corrections).