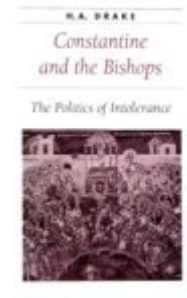


H.A. Drake. *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xx + 609 \$68.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-6218-2.



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Published on H-Catholic (November, 2000)

The importance of Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, for the establishment of foundational patterns of state-church relations in the West has long been recognized. Less well known and understood are the political and social processes at work in both the Roman Empire and the Christian Church before, during, and following Constantine's reign, which is precisely the focus of this book. H.A. Drake, a professor of history at the University of California at Santa Barbara, strives to correct what he considers the two major faults of earlier historiography: the tendency to concentrate on the disputed question of the sincerity of Constantine's conversion to the Christian religion, and the tendency to assume that the Christian Church was a unified organization that accepted passively the role that was assigned to it by Constantine.

He also challenges the assumption that the Church was inherently intolerant, and that it was natural and inevitable for it to take advantage of its new privileged situation under Constantine to move from its previous position of a persecuted religion to one of enlisting the power of the Ro-

man state to enforce doctrinal orthodoxy and unity and to suppress "superstitious" pagan practices and religions. Drake contends that if there has been a "serious misdiagnosis of the causes, origins, and nature of Christian coercion," it is because scholars have tended to use "theological tools to understand political problems" (p. xvi). His thesis is that the explanation of the Church's adoption of a policy of intolerance by the late fourth century "lies in social processes, not theology" (Ibid.).

The book's focus is on politics, on the one side on the "extraordinary political skills" of Constantine, whose "greatest achievement" was the creation of "a stable consensus of Christians and pagans in favor of a religiously neutral public space" (p. xv), and, on the other side, "the struggle within Christian ranks over the propriety of using the coercive powers of the state in support of their beliefs" (Ibid.). The organization of the book reflects the focus. An opening vignette describes a little-noticed meeting in Constantinople in 335 C.E. between the emperor and a delegation of Christian bishops determined to get rid of Athanasius, the

young archbishop of Alexandria and the determined foe of Arianism, a scene which for Drake symbolizes both the Christian Church's reversal of fortunes within the Empire and the new role of the bishops as important players on the political stage. Drake then describes the political structure and functioning of the Roman Empire and the emperor's role therein, and the pre-Constantinian evolution of the Church and in particular the emergence of the bishops as the key leaders of local Christian communities, leaders who worked out cooperative mechanisms for maintaining unity within the Christian movement and also represented Christian communities in their relationships with the larger society and the Roman state. Subsequent chapters trace in rich detail how these relationships evolved during the fourth century.

With respect to the crucial relation between state and church as it was developing in the first decades under Constantine, Drake insists that at first there were no rules. Rather, it was a scramble for position. None of the traditions or ideology that had grown up around the person of the emperor in the centuries since the invention of the principate were of much help to Constantine in dealing with players like the Christian bishops each representing a different constituency. The bishops, on their side, turned out to be "no strangers to the game of political hardball" (p. 32). We are shown an ongoing process of negotiation, a process that was still going on in the last years of Constantine's reign. Patterns of church-state relations that would last for centuries were only gradually worked out.

In tracing developments on the emperor's side of the equation, Drake points out that Constantine was dealing with an unprecedented situation in that Rome had never known a priesthood that was both organized and independent in the way that the bishops had become. Traditional Roman priesthoods had been held by the same elites that monopolized all public offices. From the early

empire, the delicate balance that had evolved between those elites and the emperor involved patronage on one side and service to the state on the other as well as an ideology that justified the rule of the "good emperor" as resting on a moral authority that transcended raw military power. Fourth-century bishops challenged understood patterns, because although they could be well educated and powerful men, the criteria for their office was different, based on personal qualities of faith rather than the old standards of class and culture, and, moreover, the Roman state had no say in their selection. By the early fourth century, thanks in good part to the effective leadership provided by its bishops, Christianity was a mass movement commanding the allegiance of perhaps ten percent of the population of the empire (a larger percent of the population than all the traditional elites put together) and commanding sufficient resources to ensure that its interests could not be ignored. The emperor had to establish a working relationship with an organization over which he had no formal control, and whose criteria for moral approbation differed significantly from classical values.

As Drake depicts the developing relationship, Constantine brought to this challenge both sophisticated political skills and his own agenda. Whatever the sincerity of his conversion and whatever the sophistication of his understanding of his new religion, Drake shows that what the emperor sought to implement from the time of the so-called Edict of Milan was a comprehensive policy of religious toleration, a policy that encompassed pagan monotheists, Christians, and even polytheists who did not insist on blood sacrifices. This was a policy that solved "the problem of how to incorporate Christians into a state that equated security with divine support" (p. 193). In the language of Licinius (Constantine's co-emperor at the time), the two emperors decided that they "might grant both to Christians and to all men freedom to follow whatever religion each one wished, in order that whatever divinity there is in the seat of

heaven may be appeased and made propitious" to the rulers and to their subjects (cited, p. 194).

Constantine's conviction that proper honour to the Christian God (whom he believed had assisted his victory over his rival Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian bridge) was essential for the prosperity of the empire led him to a policy of privileges for the Christian clergy and state subsidies for their support and for the building of churches. His concern for order and stability within the empire also led him to intervene in internal Christian quarrels, the two most important of which were those involving the Arian heresy in the East and the Donatist schism in North Africa. Tracing how Constantine dealt with the two cases, Drake demonstrates that in both "he showed a consistent tendency to come down on the side of Christians who would be inclusive " (p. 250). In dealing with Donatist rigorists, unyielding Arians, and purist Nicene fathers, Drake concludes, "Constantine favored not only peace and harmony but also inclusiveness and flexibility" (p. 271). The argument is that Constantine's agenda was for "a moderate and inclusive Christianity, who would in turn be part of a coalition of Christians and pagans united behind a policy that provided a religiously neutral public space" (Ibid.). What happened in the later years of his reign, according to Drake, is that "Constantine lost control of the agenda, and, ultimately, ... the message" (p. 272).

In explaining how this happened, Drake stresses what he calls the "unintended consequences" of what, in effect, was "an act of political horse trading" (p. 348) between the Emperor and bishops whereby the bishops accepted the burdens of civic responsibilities by acting as judges over disputes among members of their Christian communities (an agenda Constantine pushed out of despair over corruption among existing judicial officials) and the Emperor in turn assisted the bishops in their goal of achieving unity within the Christian community (even to point of employing the coercive power of the state for this purpose,

especially against fanatical and disruptive sectarians such as the more extreme Donatists). Drake stresses the point that Christians first used "both a rhetoric conducive to coercion and the tools of coercion itself not against pagans but against other Christians" (p. 416). Subsequently, and especially after the brief reign of Julian "the apostate," which rekindled Christian fear of persecution and polarized relations between Christians and pagans, the Christian community became more militant and more coercive, largely because it had been destabilized by internal conflicts and the strains of absorbing the influx of new members (in part a consequence of the favors Constantine had showered on Christians).

It may be noted that Drake's general interpretation of the nature and goal of Constantine's policy of toleration is perhaps not as novel or as counter to the received historiography as the author intimates. Drake himself had outlined his interpretation in the introduction of his edition of Eusebius's orations *In Praise of Constantine* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1976), which was soon cited with approval by other scholars.[1] Nevertheless, it is extremely helpful to have this reading spelled out in detail and with extensive evidence and argumentation in a full-scale monograph.

Moreover, the utility of the work is greatly enhanced by Drake's habit of engaging both the historiography and the nature of the evidence at almost every point in his well organized, well documented, and well written study. Nor is Drake reticent about drawing lessons relevant to dealing with intolerance in our contemporary world. His book can be recommended to readers interested in the circumstances and nature of the "Constantinian revolution," in subsequent church-state relations in the West, and in contemporary relations between organized religions and their host societies.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Gregory T. Armstrong's 1964 article, "Church and State Relations: the changes Wrought by Constantine," *Journal of Bible and Religion* (32: 1-7).

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Citation: Richard A. Lebrun. Review of Drake, H.A. *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2000.

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