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THE LANGUAGE OF CONSTANTINE'S PROPAGANDA

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An extensive literature on the subject of Constantine's religious development before 325 assumes that Constantine's propaganda, notably that found in the *Panegyrici Latini* and in the coins, reflects the contemporary religious beliefs of the emperor. Even those who are convinced that after October of 312 Constantine was committed to a christianizing mission have believed that the panegyrics of 310 and 311 (and even occasionally of 307) are evidence of paganism before 312.[1]

The panegyrist of 310 says that Constantine made lavish gifts to a temple of Apollo in Gaul, that in the temple he saw the god himself present, accompanied by Victory, and that he recognized himself in the appearance of that one to whom the rulership of the world had been promised (*Pan. Lat.* 6[7].21). For a long time scholars interpreted this to mean that Constantine had professed some sort of Apolline faith,[2] or had identified himself with Apollo,[3] and harmonized the evidence of this panegyric, the strongest indication that Constantine was pagan, with the claims of Eusebius about his conversion. However, in 1980 Barbara Rodgers argued (successfully, I think) that the panegyrist of 310 implied that Constantine recognized himself in the form of Augustus, and not of Apollo.[4] An identification of Constantine with Augustus instead of Apollo makes the story in the panegyric of 310 seem even more a matter of conventional rhetoric and less a factual description of a religious experience. It may be in the category of the story by the panegyrist of 321 to the effect that in 312 all the Gauls saw armies of big handsome soldiers flying through the air and calling out that they were going to help Constantine (*Pan. Lat.* 4[10].15).

[1] The extent of this literature is indicated by Barbara Saylor Rodgers in "Constantine's Pagan Vision," *Byzantion* 50 (1980) 259–78. See also her "Divine Insinuation in the *Panegyrici Latini*," *Historia* 25 (1986) 69–104, and "The Metamorphosis of Constantine," *CQ* 39.1 (1989) 233. These studies are the basis for useful discussion of the panegyrics as evidence regarding Constantine's religion.

[2] Rodgers, "Constantine's Pagan Vision" (above, note 1) nn. 2, 3, and 5. I have not yet seen J. M. Rodriguez Gerras, "Costantino en los panegiricos," *Studia Zamorensia (hist)* 7 (1986) 423–28.

[3] J.-J. Hatt, "La vision de Constantin au sanctuaire de Grand et l'origine celtique du labarum," *Latomus* 9 (1950) 431; M. R. Alföldi, "Die Sol-Comes Münze vom Jahre 325," in *Mullus, Festschr. Th. Klauser* (1964) 10–16; J. Le Gall, "Les cheveux de Constantin," *Mélanges d'histoire ancienne offerts à William Seston* (Paris 1974) 267–76; S. G. MacCormack, "Roma, Constantinopolis, the Emperor and his Genius," *CQ* 69 (1975) 139 (citing Alföldi).

[4] "Constantine's Pagan Vision" (above, note 1).

A second study by Rodgers indicates that even before 312 Constantine's panegyrists had begun to reduce the role of the pagan gods.[5] The caution of Julian's panegyrist in 362 shows that an orator could pay close attention to the sensibilities of his audience, and the fact that Theodosius' panegyrist called him a god is another warning against the conclusion that the paganism of a panegyrist reflects paganism of the emperor.[6] None of this suggests that the claim that Constantine made gifts to a temple of Apollo was false. However, if it is true it does not prove that Constantine either had a vision of Apollo or was a pagan. A Christian in his circumstances in 310 might have made gifts (we are not told what they were),[7] and the panegyrist was presumably recommending Constantine to a pagan audience.

If the panegyric of 310 does not settle the matter, it may be that the panegyrics simply do not reflect paganism of Constantine. There are several indications that the usual assumption should not be made. The evidence of the panegyrics is not well supported by that of the coins, because after 312 the coins and panegyrics are out of step, the pagan gods disappearing from the panegyrics while the coins continue to display *Sol Invictus*: if it is true that after 312 the coins attest "not the devotion of the emperor to a vague solar monotheism, but the dead weight of iconographic tradition"[8] then they are not very useful as indicators of the emperor's own religious beliefs prior to 312. Constantine himself never said that he had ever been a pagan. On the contrary, after October of 324 he said on at least five occasions that his christianizing mission had begun at the Britannic ocean, or had occupied his whole reign, or had included the wars against both Maxentius and Licinius.[9] These statements may be regarded as mere wishful thinking by the later Constantine about his earlier career, but a fragment of Petrus Patricius quotes Constantine as implying in 317 that the campaign against Licinius had begun at the ocean, i.e., long before the immediate campaign of 316–17.[10] It is also important to recognize that Constantine tailored his statements according to the religion of his audience: Eusebius tells us in *VC* 2.23 that there were two versions of the letter of 324 to the eastern provincials—one to the churches, the other to the general public. Finally, if Constantine was a pagan until 312, the Constantinian documents of 312 and the following years should show a Christian development, and they do

[5] "Divine Insinuation" (above, note 1) 85.

[6] "Divine Insinuation" (above, note 1) 89–92, 92–96 and 99.

[7] *CTh* 16.10,19 (of 407) is evidence for the continuation of funding for the old religion. For the preservation of temples for public use or as objects of art, cf. *CTh* 16.10,3 (of 342); 8 (of 382); 15 and 18 (of 399).

[8] T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass. 1981) 48.

[9] Eusebius, *VC* 2.28; 2.64–65; 4.9; Constantine's *Speech to the assembly of the saints* 22, 25 and 26; Gelasius of Cyzicus, *HE* 2.7,35–38.

[10] Fragment 15 of Petrus Patricius (*FHG*, vol. 4, 189–90) quotes an angry reply by Constantine to envoys sent by Licinius to negotiate an end to the war in 317. I would translate it as follows. "I repudiated my own brother-in-law as a colleague because of his offences. I have not come campaigning from the ocean all the way to this place just to receive a slave along with him into the imperial college. Tell him to forget about Valens." The reference to the ocean, which is a long way from any possible starting-point (Arles or Verona?) for the campaign of 316–17, is reminiscent of *VC* 2.28.

not. Any reader of the documents will realize that Constantine's letter of 314 to the bishops at the Council of Arles sounds as Christian as anything he said later, and other examples could be offered.[11]

That Constantine could tailor his statements according to the religion of his audience casts some light on a feature of the panegyrics which is shared by other Constantinian propaganda statements, and which tells against the view that this material is reliable evidence of the emperor's personal religious beliefs. It appears that in spite of the fervor of his many statements to bishops and his efforts on behalf of the Church and Christians during the years 312–24, Constantine's statements to the public were all neutral as regards religion. This is not surprising, since there is no reason to think that he was looking for unnecessary trouble, but it is important. The evidence is as follows.

The panegyrist of 311 expatiates on Constantine's tax remission for Autun (*Pan. Lat.* 5[8]). He mentions a *divina mens* which rules the world (10,2), but the only pagan expressions are an exclamatory *di immortales* (7,6) and the statement that Constantine makes up to his subjects what Terra and Jupiter withhold (13,6). The panegyrist of 313 names no pagan god, and says nothing of the fact that Constantine refused to ascend the Capitol for the sacrifice to Jupiter during the triumphal entry into Rome (*Pan. Lat.* 12[9].19,1ff.). Maxentius is vilified on those *moral* (not religious) grounds (Chapters 3, 5–7; 4, 3–5), which are found also in the *HE* and *VC* of Eusebius (*HE* 8.14; 9.9; *VC* 1.33–38), and which reflect the non-Christian language to the public in 312. The orator quite conspicuously attributes Constantine's willingness to begin the extremely dangerous (he says) war with Maxentius, against the advice of almost all his officers, to prompting from a god who is not named and whose relationship with Constantine is private.[12] On the Arch of Constantine, in the ambiguous phrase *instinctu divinitatis*, such reticence is maintained. Yet there surely was no secret, if there is any truth in the stories of the *labarum* and of the statue of Constantine (Eusebius, *VC* 1.28–31; 1.40; 2.7–9). Constantine's language to the bishops is consistent with his legislation and with his public refusal to conduct a pagan ceremony. The neutrality of the Arch and the coy language of the panegyric of 313 are not. I take it that their function was to play down the religious differences between Constantine and his opponents.[13]

Of the contemporary propaganda used during the first war against Licinius in 316–17 the pagan sources preserve a few examples or traces. Praxagoras of

[11] This is Optatus, Appendix 5, edited by K. Ziwsa *CSEL* 26 (Vienna 1893) 208–10. I have discussed it in "Constantine's Conversion: Do We Really Need It?" *Phoenix* 41.4 (1987) 430–32, and in "Constantine's Early Religious Development," *JRH* 15.3 (1989) 283–91.

[12] Chapter 2. I take it that the orator's reticence regarding this god was due to the fact that it was not politic to say more. The passage is discussed by H. Schrörs, *Konstantins des Grossen Kreuzerscheinung* (Bonn 1913) 7–13.

[13] Historians do not stress the need for prudence on Constantine's part, but see H. Grégoire, "L'authenticité et l'historicité de la *Vita Constantini* attribuée à Eusèbe de Césarée," *Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Belgique*, Classe des Lettres[5] 39 (1953) 466.

Athens, who wrote his laudatory history of Constantine between 324 and 330, said that when Constantine found out that his kinsman was treating his subjects in a cruel and inhuman manner he would not tolerate his *hybris*, and made war on him in order to change him from a tyrant into a kingly ruler.[14] Aurelius Victor (41.2–5) says that the two went to war *ob diversos mores*, the differences being Licinius' parsimony and his use of crucifixion as a punishment. The *Epitome de Caesaribus* says that Licinius' faults were rusticity, avarice, distrust of education and hatred of forensic activity (41.8–10). Victor's examples of disagreements suggest a broad disagreement on religious policy, for parsimony could have been an accusation made against a colleague who was less ready than Constantine to reimburse churches for damage done during the Great Persecution, and the disagreement over the use of crucifixion needs no comment. The evidence of the *Epitome* fits well enough with this interpretation. That the disagreement was in fact over religious policy is confirmed by Licinius' persecution of Christians when he could no longer tolerate the settlement of 317.

In the last of these panegyrics on Constantine, that of 321, the orator names no pagan god, and Licinius is never mentioned (*Pan. Lat.* 4[10]). At the beginning and end of the speech, which is largely concerned to recommend the dynasty, Constantine's sons are prominent. The rest describes how Constantine got rid of the tyrant Maxentius, again attacked on *moral* grounds—for greed, lust, cowardice, perfidy, cruelty, arrogance, etc.—who had made Rome miserable (9,1; 9,3; 9,4; 9,5; 30,1; 31,3; 32,2). The whole campaign of 312 is recounted, and three times we are told that Constantine's god helped him (13; 16,1; 26,1). The orator implies that this anonymous being will help Constantine against the new tyrant also, by a private and discreet arrangement. We are three years from the open effort to christianize the empire.

For the war of 324 we have only one other clear trace of contemporary public statements. Praxagoras says that the reason for the war was that Licinius broke his oaths and pursued all kinds of wickedness (219*FGrH* T.1.6).

A special note is necessary here regarding the evidence of Eusebius. Because he claimed that Constantine became a Christian after he had decided to attack Maxentius, Eusebius could not represent the war of 312 as a crusade. In both the *HE* and the *VC* he attacks Maxentius on moral grounds, reflecting the Constantinian public propaganda of the time. However, he says that both of the wars against Licinius were fought for religious reasons. Now, that statement may be true, but it is not the same as saying that Constantine publicly declared that he was fighting Licinius for religious reasons. The neutral language of the panegyric of 321 indicates that Constantine had not made public statements regarding his christianizing motive in 316, and there was no reason why he should have behaved differently in 324.

[14] 219*FGrH* T.1.5. Barbara Rodgers has pointed out to me that Praxagoras' claim may have had an official origin, for in 321 the panegyrist Nazarius (*Pan. Lat.* 4(10).9–10; 12.1) used the same justification for Constantine's initial accommodation of and subsequent attack on Maxentius (before rendering apology unnecessary by making Maxentius the aggressor).

I conclude that during the period 310–24 Constantine did not make an issue of his religion when addressing a broad audience. The declared policy was toleration and restitution, and not much more. It cannot have been prudent to attempt more. In this connection it is particularly important to note how well it suited Constantine to claim that the Great Persecution was a civil war (Eusebius, *VC* 2.49), thereby blurring the distinction between a civil war for religious reasons and the normal duty of the emperor. Hence the disillusionment of fourth-century pagans who found themselves faced with an anomaly—a "good" emperor with a "bad" policy.

The neutral language of Constantine's public propaganda was maintained into a period when there can be little doubt that he was fully committed to a christianizing mission. The change to the positive language of the letter of 324 to the eastern provincials seems, therefore, to reflect an increase of power rather than a religious development. This does not prove conclusively that the early propaganda does not reflect his personal religious beliefs, but it does, I submit, shift the burden of proof to those who would maintain the contrary.