

*The Twenty-eighth*

**ERIC SYMES ABBOTT**

**Memorial Lecture**

**CONSTANTINE'S VISION AND THE  
CHURCH TODAY**

**From the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (AD 312)  
to the Twenty-First Century**

delivered by

***Professor Dame Averil Cameron FBA FKC***  
Former Warden of Keble College, Oxford

***at Westminster Abbey***  
on Thursday 2 May 2013

and

***at Keble College, Oxford***  
on Friday 3 May 2013



**The Very Revd Eric Symes Abbott  
(1906 – 1983)**

*The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Fund was endowed by friends of Eric Abbott to provide for an annual lecture or course of lectures on spirituality and pastoralia. The lecture is usually given in May on consecutive evenings in London and Oxford.*

*The members of the Committee are:  
the Dean of King's College London (Chairman);  
the Dean of Westminster; the Warden of Keble College, Oxford;  
the Reverend John Robson; the Right Reverend the Lord Harries of  
Pentregarth FKC; and the Revd Canon Professor Vernon White.*

This Lecture is the twenty-eighth in the series, and details of previous lectures may be found overleaf. Booklets of some – although not all – of these lectures are available from the Dean's Office at King's College London (contact details as below), priced at 50p per booklet plus 50p postage and packing. Please specify the year, the lecture number, and the lecturer when requesting booklets.

All lecture texts are also available on the Westminster Abbey website ([www.westminster-abbey.org](http://www.westminster-abbey.org)). Please follow the link on the home page to 'Events', then to 'Lectures and seminars', and 'Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lectures'.

-----

***Constantine's vision and the church today***  
**© 2013 Professor Dame Averil Cameron**

Published by  
The Dean's Office  
King's College London  
WC2R 2LS

Tel: 020 7848 2333  
Fax: 020 7848 2344  
Email: [dean@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:dean@kcl.ac.uk)

## Previous Lectures in the Series:

- 1986 I. Cardinal Basil Hume [untitled] **OUT OF PRINT**
- 1987 II. The Rt Revd Simeon Nkoane CR: “*Spirituality in a Violent Society*”
- 1988 III. Dame Janet Baker: “*Spirituality and Music*” **OUT OF PRINT**
- 1989 IV. The Revd Professor Rowan Williams, University of Oxford: “*On Being Creatures*”
- 1990 V. The Very Revd Alan Jones, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco: “*For Their Sakes I Consecrate Myself: Priesthood and the search for a credible Catholicism*” **OUT OF PRINT**
- 1991 VI. Timothy Schroder: “*The Spiritual in Art*” **OUT OF PRINT**
- 1992 VII. The Revd John Fenton: “*John of the Cross and the Gospel according to Mark*”
- 1993 VIII. Angela Tilby: “*He Made the Stars Also...*”
- 1994 IX. The Revd David Conner: “*Christian Counsel and the Meaning of Wholeness*” **OUT OF PRINT**
- 1995 X. The Most Revd Richard Holloway DD, Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church: “*Deconstructing the Church’s Ministry*”
- 1996 XI. David Hare: “*When Shall We Live?*” **OUT OF PRINT**
- 1997 XII. The Rt Revd and Rt Hon Lord Habgood: “*Waiting for God*”
- 1998 XIII. Canon Eric James FKC: “*Spirituality, Shakespeare and Royalty*” **OUT OF PRINT**
- 1999 XIV. The Rt Hon Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss: “*Who is to judge? The role of the judiciary in ethical issues*”
- 2000 XV. The Revd Canon Dr Martyn Percy: “*A Knowledge of Angles: How spiritual are the English?*”
- 2001 XVI. Professor Stephen Clark, University of Liverpool: “*Deep Time: Does It Matter?*”

- 2002 XVII. The Revd Mark Oakley, St Paul's Covent Garden: "*Spiritual Society, Secular Church? Private prayer and public religion*" **OUT OF PRINT**
- 2003 XVIII. The Revd Professor Duncan B Forrester, University of Edinburgh: "*Beyond Racism and Sectarianism: Is Religion the Problem or the Solution?*"
- 2004 XIX. Father Timothy Radcliffe OP: "*The Crisis of Truth Telling in our Society*" **OUT OF PRINT**
- 2005 XX. The Revd Nicholas Holtam, St Martin-in-the-Fields: "*A Room with a View: The Aspiration of a Parish Church*"
- 2006 XXI. The Very Revd Vivienne Faull, Dean of Leicester: "*A New Song in a Strange Land: the contribution of women to the priestly ministry of the Church*"
- 2007 XXII. The Revd Dr Richard A. Burrige, Dean of King's College London: "*Being Biblical? Slavery, Sexuality, and the Inclusive Community*" **OUT OF PRINT**
- 2008 XXIII. The Revd Canon Dr Jane Shaw, University of Oxford: "*The Mystical Turn: Religious Experience in the Modern World*"
- 2009 XXIV. The Revd Professor Alister McGrath, King's College London: "*Religious and Scientific Faith: The Case of Charles Darwin's Origin of Species*"
- 2010 XXV: The Rt Revd the Lord Harries of Pentregarth, former Bishop of Oxford: "*The End of the Permissive Society? Towards a Christian Understanding of the Common Good*"
- 2011 XXVI: The Rt Revd & Rt Hon Dr Richard Chartres KCVO, Bishop of London: "*The Word in Print: Does the King James Bible have a Future?*"
- 2012 XXVII: The Rt Revd Dr Peter Selby, formerly Bishop of Worcester & Bishop to HM Prisons: "*Mis-Establishment: Locating, and re-locating, the Church of England*"



***CONSTANTINE'S VISION AND THE CHURCH TODAY***  
***From the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (AD 312)***  
***to the Twenty-First Century***

Seventeen hundred years ago this year, in February AD 313, the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which ended the persecution of Christians and declared religious toleration in the Roman empire. Seventeen hundred and one years ago, at the end of October in the year AD 312, when he was already about 40 years old, he saw a vision of the cross in the sky, won a great battle in Rome fought on and around one of the bridges over the river Tiber, and was converted to Christianity, which he went on to make the official religion of the Roman empire. Thereby Constantine set in motion the Christianisation of Europe and made the Christian church what it is today.

So far so good. This is what you will find in many books, and it is certainly what many people believe. But the problem is that apart from the dates, every separate element is open to question, if not definitely mistaken. For instance, the 'Edict of Milan' was not a legal edict but an imperial letter; it was not issued by Constantine but by his co-emperor and rival, Licinius, and persecution of Christians had already been ended two years before. How far the so-called 'Edict' was actually about religious toleration in the modern sense, I will

come back to later in this lecture. As for Constantine's vision, many scholars now believe that what he saw in the sky was the phenomenon known as a solar halo, and even those who are prepared to admit that he may have had a religious experience doubt that this was when he converted to Christianity. He had also seen other visions, including, it is reported, a vision of the god Apollo, the sun god. Finally, he may have set Christianity on the path towards becoming a state religion, but the idea that he made it the official religion of the empire is a very modern one – Constantine would not have understood it.

Constantine remains an enigma. These two anniversaries, and that of his accession in AD 306, have been receiving a huge amount of attention. There have been major exhibitions in York (where Constantine was first proclaimed emperor), Trier (his western capital), Ravenna, Rome, and of course Milan, where there is currently an exhibition with the title 'The Edict of Milan and the Age of Toleration'. A play about Constantine has been put on this year with great fanfare in Belgrade, commemorating the fact that he was born at Nish (Naissus) in Serbia. A day's conference on Constantine was recently held at the British Museum, and an Italian encyclopaedia devoted to him will soon be published. A raft of new books appearing over the last year or two in English and other languages depict him in wildly different ways according to the



personal approach of each author. Finally, the last speaker at the British Museum event – a distinguished historian of Roman art who is now ordained in the Church of England – forcefully declared that the reign of Constantine had been ‘a tragedy’.

What is all this about? I want first of all to ask why there seem to be so many problems and disagreements surrounding Constantine, and then to bring out some of the tensions and ambiguities that surrounded him, as well as the pressures that he was under. I will argue that they have strong resonances with our own experiences and those of church leaders, governments and anyone in authority today. But history is often a matter of unexpected results. Constantine could not foresee the future, and what we read about him in contemporary authors is not what he himself necessarily intended or realized. Yet without him what kind of church would there be today, and would it be better than what we now have, as my colleague at the British Museum evidently believed?

Let us listen to some of Constantine’s own words, from a homily he apparently delivered in Latin on Good Friday, perhaps in modern Sofia in Bulgaria (another imperial centre).<sup>1</sup> This speech

---

<sup>1</sup> Trans. Mark Edwards, *Constantine and Christendom. The Oration to the Saints, The Greek and Latin Accounts of the Discovery of the Cross, the Edict of Constantine to Pope Silvester*, Translated Texts for Historians 39 (Liverpool, 2003).

would have taken about two hours to deliver – a mere nothing for a speech at the time. The very recent persecution of Christians is much in Constantine’s mind. So are the pagan gods, with their oracles and temples. For him, though, the world can only be explained by belief in the providence and goodness of God. Plato had some understanding of this, but still believed in many gods. But Christ the Saviour has shown the truth by his life, his miracles and teachings. The emperor knows the standard arguments against Christianity and how to address them. He refers to the prophets Daniel and Isaiah and to the story of Moses. He quotes the oracle of the Sibyl and interprets the child foretold in Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue as a reference to Christ, and ascribes his own victory over his rivals, the persecutors, to the inspiration and help of God.

Presentation is crucial to establishing authority, and in 2013 we have seen a new Archbishop introducing African dancers into Canterbury cathedral, and a new pope refusing to wear the ermine or live in the papal apartments. Constantine chose to speak in the language of Christian apologetic. Delivered by a Roman emperor, this speech was sensational. Some scholars believe it was given very soon after the ‘Edict of Milan’, but could Constantine really have absorbed so quickly the complex arguments that Christians had built up over three centuries against the pagan gods? However, Constantine had a taste for preaching; much later in his reign, we are

told that he used to preach to the court on Fridays, to the embarrassment of the courtiers and officials, who shuffled their feet and looked away.

The language of Roman law always tended to be moralizing, but Constantine outdid his predecessors here too. After he had defeated Licinius in AD 324, and become the sole emperor of the Roman world, he issued two pieces of legislation in the form of letters sent in both Latin and Greek to Roman officials. The first ordered the restoration of property to those who had been dispossessed during the persecutions, but also contained a lengthy statement of Constantine's Christian beliefs. Their truth has long been obvious, he says, but 'now there have been even more clearly demonstrated by more manifest deeds and more brilliant achievements both the absurdity of doubt and the magnitude of the power of the great God ...' His language is nothing if not turgid, but he goes on to ask 'Who is likely to meet with any good, if he neither acknowledges the God who is the source of good things nor is willing to worship him properly?'.<sup>2</sup>

The other law lectured his subjects about the wickedness of paganism and the benefits of conversion to Christianity, and contains

---

<sup>2</sup> Trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius, Life of Constantine* (Oxford, 1999), 104.

lengthy thanks to God for demonstrating the truth, even though in the final paragraph Constantine admits that it was not yet possible to prohibit paganism altogether. The emperor was no slouch in presentation, and has recently been memorably seen as ‘a populist autocrat’.<sup>3</sup> But Constantine also believed he had a duty imposed on him by God, to establish right worship in the empire. In the year after the ‘Edict of Milan’ he wrote to the Roman governor in North Africa, this time about quarrels between Christians themselves, which he had already tried to settle by calling a meeting in Rome, inviting the parties to come to a church council at Arles; his reason is telling – he says that God will only look well on his reign ‘if all men worship the most holy God by the due rites of the catholic religion in harmonious and brotherly observance’.<sup>4</sup>

Constantine was certainly very interested in the church – after all, he summoned the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council, whose agreed statement (those who refused to sign were sent into exile) formed the basis of the Creed we still use today. Yet against every example like these, one can find a different argument suggesting caution or ambivalence. For years Constantine kept the

---

<sup>3</sup> See John Dillon, *The Judgment of Constantine. Law, Communication and Control* (Ann Arbor, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Letter of Constantine to Aelafius, trans. Mark Edwards, *Optatus, Against the Donatists*, Translated Texts for Historians 27 (Liverpool, 1997), App. 3, pp. 181-84.

dedication to the sun-god on his coins; the inscription of the Arch of Constantine next to the Colosseum in Rome is carefully ambiguous; pagan temples were closed only in one or two exemplary cases; he had a statue of himself looking suspiciously like Apollo put on a column in Constantinople; he was only baptized when he was dying, and even then was hailed as divine when he died. Was this because he was not really committed to Christianity? Or perhaps because he was a canny politician in a world where Christians formed a very small minority of the population?

Most of the many scholars who have written about Constantine have tried to understand his own psychology, which is probably an impossible task. But there were other factors, resonant for today.

An Israeli scholar writing of this period has referred to a ‘media revolution’, and I think he is right.<sup>5</sup> Constantine himself had picked up a lot of the current terminology about Christianity versus paganism, probably from the Latin Christian writer Lactantius, who was teaching in Nicomedia when Constantine was growing up and later became the tutor of Constantine’s eldest son. But Constantine’s real publicist was someone different – the bishop Eusebius of

---

<sup>5</sup> Doron Mendels, *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity. An Essay on Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1999).

Caesarea in Palestine, who was also the first historian of the church since the time of Christ. When Constantine won his victory at the Milvian Bridge Eusebius composed an addendum to his history of the church comparing Constantine and his troops to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea; Maxentius and his army were pushed into the river Tiber and drowned just like the chariots of Pharaoh. Much later, Eusebius wrote a *Life of Constantine* which carries the comparison of Constantine and Moses much further; like Moses, Constantine had led his people from the tyranny of the persecutors, and as God's servant he had given them the true law from God. His description of Constantine's last campaign against Licinius in AD 324 is modelled directly on the story of Moses: Constantine builds a tent in which he prays while on campaign, 'like the ancient prophet of God, who, so the divine oracles assure us, pitched his tent outside the encampment'.<sup>6</sup> Eusebius's account of Constantine's vision is patterned on the story of Moses and the burning bush, and Constantine's standard, known as the *labarum*, is described in the same language as the Ark of the Covenant in the book of Exodus.

Eusebius did not write this *Life* until the very end of Constantine's reign, and when he did, he took the opportunity to correct and enhance the version he had added years before to his history of the church. When he wrote this addendum, Licinius was

---

<sup>6</sup> Trans. Cameron and Hall, p. 99.

still Constantine's ally – and indeed the 'Edict of Milan' was the result of a meeting in Milan between Licinius, the ruler of the east, and the newly victorious Constantine, who ruled in the west. Moreover the statement itself came from Licinius, not Constantine. So Licinius was pro-Christian too. So, to some degree, was Constantine's opponent Maxentius, and the senior emperor Galerius had called off actual persecution of Christians two years before. But when Eusebius came to write the *Life of Constantine* many years later, Licinius had long ago been defeated. He is now deliberately blackened and cast in the role of a persecutor – no longer the ally, he has become the foil for Constantine, the new Moses and the defender of Christianity.

This is not Constantinian propaganda; it came from Eusebius himself. Eusebius was not close to Constantine. He probably met him only once or twice, most memorably when he saw him at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. On that occasion he was bowled over: as he entered the hall where all the bishops were waiting, the emperor looked 'like a heavenly angel of God, his bright mantle shedding lustre like beams of light, shining with the fiery radiance of a purple robe and decorated with the dazzling brilliance of gold and precious stones'. After the council Constantine put on a banquet for the bishops, also celebrating the twentieth anniversary of his reign, and Eusebius thought it was like being in God's Kingdom. It was almost

too much for him that Christian clergy could enter the palace, and not be afraid of the guards with their drawn swords.<sup>7</sup> It does not take much imagination to compare this with the ceremonial scenes of our own day, though Constantine's armed guards were on a different level from the Queen's Yeomen of the Guard in Buckingham Palace nowadays.

So here is a bishop who was expressing his own agendas and his own hopes. He describes the spectacle of the Council of Nicaea but not its proceedings – that would have been too awkward, because he himself was under something of a cloud at the time, having been on the wrong side. However it did not take much time for the sight of the emperor to suggest to him the advantages of toeing the imperial line. He was not the only bishop who saw the enormous opportunity presented for the church in having an emperor who was overtly Christian. The American scholar Harold Drake has argued that Constantine himself was naturally cautious and in fact tolerant, but that it was the Christian bishops like Eusebius who pushed him towards more clearly Christian (and intolerant) policies.<sup>8</sup> Conceptions of tolerance and intolerance are however modern ideas, and I believe that casting Constantine as 'tolerant' is another example of trying to depict him as we want him to be, wishful

---

<sup>7</sup> Trans. Cameron and Hall, pp. 125-27.

<sup>8</sup> H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops. The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore, MD, 2000).



thinking in fact, just like that of Eusebius. But it was not only Eusebius. Others had their own agendas, and the influences Constantine encountered when he first started to involve himself in matters of the church are worth looking at a little more closely.

Christian clergy are indeed high on the list. Constantine's father Constantius had been ruling in the west and Constantine was with him when he died at York in AD 306. Bishop Eusebius does his level best to suggest (without quite stating it) that Constantius was also a Christian, and paints an affecting picture of a deathbed scene with all his family around. Constantius's court, he claims, was just like a church. But later he lets slip that Constantine had to turn to some clergy to instruct him as to who his father's god actually was. They clearly did a good job: as soon as he wins his victory in AD 312 Constantine gives special tax concessions to clergy, and he instructs provincial governors to use state funds to help bishops travel to church councils. He gives bishops legal powers and he is extremely deferential to them, not chairing church councils himself, and saying that they, not he, are God's representatives.

We surely see the bishops in action here, consolidating their position with the emperor. His stance as a listening, deferential and respectful ruler was a matter of careful balancing, and it did not stop him from exiling people if they crossed him too much. After the

Council of Nicaea he quickly had second thoughts, brought back the exiles and was eventually baptized himself by an anti-Nicene bishop. Three pro-Nicene bishops were exiled in the years after the Council, including the great theologian St Athanasius. It is easy to imagine the lobbying between the different groups; it went on throughout the fourth century, and of course later. Rulers and bishops have clashed, co-existed, and attempted to put pressure on each other throughout history since Constantine.

Let us go back for a few moments to Constantine's vision, because here if anywhere we can see different groups all claiming to know 'what really happened'. Unfortunately Constantine does not tell us about it himself, but several other writers do, and they completely contradict each other. Already in AD 313 an imperial orator – not a Christian – knew, or thought he knew, that a great victory had taken place under divine guidance. Eight years later another imperial orator had worked up the story much more: now Constantine was helped on the battlefield by heavenly armies led by his father Constantius. Three years after the battle the inscription that can still be seen on the Arch of Constantine in Rome merely referred to 'divine inspiration', leaving the identity of the divinity to be guessed at. As for Christian versions, the Latin writer Lactantius, also writing within a short time after the battle, claims that Christ appeared to Constantine in a dream and told him to paint a sign on

his soldiers' shields, perhaps (though this is not certain from his exact words) the sign of the chi-rho. As I mentioned, when news of the victory came through to him in Palestine, our friend the bishop Eusebius added a final section to his history of the church, comparing Constantine to Moses, but made no mention of a vision. However, when he composed the *Life of Constantine*, certainly many years later, Eusebius included the most famous and most circumstantial description of what Constantine saw in AD 312. Now for the first time we read that what the emperor saw was a cross of light in the sky, with the words, 'In this conquer':

'about the time of the midday sun, when day was just turning, he said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said "By this conquer". Amazement at the spectacle seized both him and the whole company of soldiers which was then accompanying him on a campaign he was conducting somewhere, and who all witnessed the miracle.'

In the following night, says Eusebius, Christ appeared to him in a dream and told him to make a copy of the sign he had seen in the sky, whereupon Constantine ordered a special standard to be made of gold and precious stones: this was the famous *labarum*.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* I.28-31, trans. Cameron and Hall, p. 81, and see the discussion in the notes.

We should not forget that a pagan orator had already claimed in a speech at the court in AD 310 that Constantine had seen a vision of the sun-god, and there are also some awkward features about Eusebius's developed version. For instance, it is here where, having previously represented Constantine's father as virtually a Christian, he says that Constantine had to consult Christian clerics to find out what this sign was all about. He is also vague, to say the least, about where the vision took place ('somewhere', while Constantine was on campaign), and having described the making of the standard in implausible detail, and claimed that Constantine always took it into battle, he actually admits 'That, however, was somewhat later', whereas at the time, Constantine was 'stunned'. Eusebius goes further: he claims that he had heard this account from the emperor himself. But, as I said earlier, while he attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, he was hardly on close terms with the emperor and he was not in the same theological camp.

Rationalist historians, of whom there are many among those who are currently writing about Constantine, have tried to bring all these accounts together. They suggest (unnecessarily, to my mind) that there was only one vision, in AD 310, which can be explained as an example of the phenomenon known as a solar halo, and that in later life Constantine had explained his victory at the Milvian Bridge to himself by reinterpreting the vision as a sign from the Christian

God. Without going as far as that, we can agree that there is more than a little embroidery in Eusebius's later version, and given that his *Life of Constantine* is quite deliberately written to present Constantine in as Christian a light as possible, I do not think we should believe the claim that he had got the story of the vision directly from the emperor. His claim cannot be proven, and is just what writers like Eusebius do to make their versions believable.

I could give you many more examples from the *Life of Constantine* that show how Eusebius has exaggerated and deliberately presented the version he wants us to believe. The obvious blackening of Constantine's opponents is one such. We can point especially to the way that Licinius (the actual author of the 'Edict of Milan') is presented, where Stuart Hall, my former colleague at King's College London, has showed beyond doubt that Eusebius had in front of him his own earlier version in his history of the church and cleverly and deliberately edited it to make Licinius into a tyrant and a persecutor of Christians.

The great Edward Gibbon and the nineteenth-century German historian Jacob Burckhardt both took a dim view of Eusebius's honesty as a historian. Burckhardt called him 'the first dishonest historian of antiquity', and on that basis both he and Gibbon rejected his Christian picture of Constantine. It took the English Byzantinist

Norman Hepburn Baynes, professor at University College London from 1931 to 1942, to show in 1929 that this hyper-critical view was wrong.<sup>10</sup> Eusebius was a major biblical scholar who was all too familiar on a personal level with the effects of persecution in Palestine and Egypt. His thinking about the place of Christianity in the Roman empire and the history of the Christian church received an extraordinary jolt when the unbelievable news came to him that one of the rival contenders for the empire might be fighting in the name of Christ. He acted as many contemporary historians would in the circumstances: he added an addendum to his history of the church, and then, as events developed further, he went back and tried to update it – we know this because we have the before-and-after versions. Eusebius was bowled over. He was one of those bishops Harold Drake wrote about, who thought he felt the hand of God and desperately wanted Constantine to succeed.

But Eusebius was not the unscrupulous journalist that Edward Gibbon and Jacob Burckhardt supposed. Moreover, other bishops were closer to the emperor and in a better position actually to influence him and to shape events. Eusebius's role was to insert him into Christian history, and to present him to posterity as God's representative, ending persecution and carrying out God's

---

<sup>10</sup> N.H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church* (London, 1929, repr. 1972).

providential plan for the empire and the future. Eusebius was a scholar, not a politician, and he was quite simply the greatest biblical scholar of his day. His teacher, Pamphilus, had been martyred in the recent persecution, and Eusebius had been with him in prison. Most importantly, Caesarea in Palestine (on the coast of modern Israel), where Eusebius lived, and of which he became the bishop, was the home of the important library of the great theologian Origen. This was tremendously important in Eusebius's intellectual and theological formation.

Eusebius survived the persecution himself, but he had visited the confessors in prison and wrote about their injuries and their missing limbs. He went on to write an enormous amount: biblical commentaries, questions and answers on Scriptural problems, works of apologetic putting the Christian arguments against pagan philosophy, the first great Christian chronicle and the first history of the church from the time of Christ.<sup>11</sup> The last two set out a Christian chronography and a Christian providential history – a Christian history of the world and a new theory of Christian time, into which Constantine would now be inserted. His two great apologetic works, to be read with his late work known as the *Theophany*, which only survives in Syriac translation, are works of

---

<sup>11</sup> T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), contains a long section which is an excellent introduction to Eusebius's biblical scholarship.

great learning. They set out the basis of a Christian schema (not new with him) which argued that Greek philosophy was not original but derived its wisdom from the law of Moses. The role of Christians was to demonstrate God's providence, starting with creation and moving to the Incarnation and the way in which the Roman empire had providentially prepared the world for Christianity. Now, Eusebius saw, Constantine offered an extraordinary opportunity to show how that message would be worked out in later history.

Two other works by Eusebius from near the end of Constantine's reign take this much further: these are the speeches he wrote for Constantine's thirtieth anniversary and for the dedication of the new Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem,<sup>12</sup> built at Constantine's orders over what were believed to be the sites of the crucifixion and the resurrection. Speaking in the presence of the emperor, Eusebius now set out a fully developed theology of empire. As a Christian emperor, Constantine was God's representative on earth, and his empire a microcosm of heaven. He had saved the world from the power of demons and led it to the light.

Surprising to us now, but apparently not a problem for Eusebius, was the fact that Constantine had yet to be baptized. But

---

<sup>12</sup> Constantine built a large basilica connected to the rock identified as Golgotha, and a rotunda, known as the Anastasis, over the resurrection site was soon added: see Martin Biddle, *The Tomb of Christ* (Stroud, 1999).



Eusebius was just one of several orators who proclaimed the emperor's praises on his anniversary – a public occasion rather like the Queen's Jubilee – and the only one to put them in religious terms, perhaps indeed the only Christian among those speaking on that occasion. The others will have put their own spin on the anniversary, and expressed their own expectations for the future. As for Eusebius, he now dared to proclaim that God's kingdom had effectively come; God's providence had made the empire uniquely suited to the coming of Christ and now, with the reign of Constantine, to the establishment of Christian rule.

It was a momentous claim. It provided the basis of the Christian political theory of the eastern Roman empire and Byzantium for centuries to come. In the west it was different: after Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in AD 410, St Augustine was faced with having to explain how God could have let this happen. Nor had paganism disappeared, as Eusebius assumed it would. Augustine's great work, the *City of God*, is in essence a response to Eusebius's optimistic view that the Kingdom had already been realized: instead, the Kingdom was still to come, and meanwhile the world must continue to live with sin and disaster.

Eusebius put his last touches to his *Life of Constantine* after the emperor's death, and as he wrote he was already feeling anxious

about the future. He was right: there was no surety that the changes Constantine had put in place would continue. Constantine's three remaining sons became joint emperors, and immediately slaughtered the surviving descendants of Constantius's first marriage – the families of Constantine's half-brothers and sisters. Very soon his sons also turned on each other. Nor was there harmony within the church. Constantine's surviving son, Constantius II, was anti-Nicene, and fought running theological battles with the great St Athanasius. It took more than fifty years before the 'Nicene' creed was officially accepted. Presumably Constantine died feeling that he had achieved his goal, but Eusebius's optimism was proved to be misplaced.

Westminster Abbey, burial place of kings and seat of royal ceremonial, is an appropriate place in which to talk about Constantine's own death and burial, and to reflect on the competing interests that come into play whenever a ruler dies. In the case of Constantine this was also a moment when conflicting pressures were at their strongest, and even Eusebius could not conceal the fact that there were some disquieting features. This was when the 'establishment' muscled in, as far as it could.

Constantine fell ill at Easter in Constantinople, and he was baptized while he was preparing to make war on the Persian empire in the east. This was a man who had had his own eldest son and his

own wife put to death in highly mysterious circumstances; yet now, Eusebius says, ‘his spiritual qualities had advanced to the peak of human perfection’.<sup>13</sup> Some Christians argued that any military service was wrong, and this was possibly why the emperor had delayed his baptism. More likely he delayed it in the hope of dying pure and newly baptized – Eusebius says that from then on he refused to wear the imperial purple, and sat on a white couch. He fell ill and was baptized in the weeks after Easter and died on the very day of Pentecost. Though he had hoped to be baptized in the River Jordan, he was to be disappointed. The army now took charge: his body was immediately taken with military pomp to Constantinople, and it was the army that came first in paying respects, deciding about the lying-in-state and sending messengers to inform his sons. An imperial accession had to be managed, and it fell to the army to manage it.

Rome might have been the expected place for the burial, or rather the funeral pyre and the usual pagan apotheosis, and the Roman senators also tried to make their case heard. In fact, breaking with tradition, Constantine was buried with Christian rites at Constantinople in the new mausoleum he had just built for himself.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, coins were issued showing him with head veiled like a

---

<sup>13</sup> *Life of Constantine*, IV.54; Eusebius does not mention the deaths of either.

<sup>14</sup> It later became the church of the Holy Apostles, on the site of the present Fatih Camii in Istanbul.

pagan priest, and in a chariot on the other side going up to heaven, from which a divine hand was stretched. This was standard imperial imagery, and how other emperors had been shown; moreover the chariot image recalled the chariot of the sun-god. Even more, as a Roman emperor, coins, and contemporary inscriptions as well, also now called Constantine *divus* – divine. Other coins used the traditional language of ‘venerable memory’ or ‘eternal piety’, and called him ‘eternal emperor’. Eusebius imagines him up in heaven but still somehow present to guide his sons on earth. But the military, and Constantine’s much larger number of still-pagan subjects, still saw him as a traditional Roman emperor.

What did Constantine himself intend? He only built his mausoleum in Constantinople at the last minute, and it was extraordinary – apparently a circular building with an altar at which services were held, and with his own sarcophagus in the centre, surrounded by empty sarcophagi or caskets, one for each of the apostles. Twenty years later (even in Constantine’s lifetime, according to some scholars) actual relics of Andrew, Timothy and Luke were found, and probably deposited in the church that had been built next to the mausoleum.

The conception of the mausoleum, where Constantine was buried in the midst of the apostles, seems like a step too far; indeed,

some scholars argue that Constantine was actually identifying himself with Christ.<sup>15</sup> It might have seemed logical to some – after all, every Roman emperor before him had become a god, so why not this one new one? It was quite probably what a lot of people expected, even possibly some new Christians. A contemporary pagan poet scathingly suggested that there were now twelve new gods to pray to. But the arrangement was accepted, and when a later bishop of Constantinople removed Constantine’s tomb after an earthquake there was a popular riot and the patriarch was removed.<sup>16</sup> But Constantine’s son Constantius may have moved the tombs of the apostles and placed the relics in the adjoining church because the existing arrangement was just too controversial – we simply do not know.

I have made a lot of use of the writings of Eusebius in this lecture, but there were other histories of Constantine that were far less enthusiastic. The problem is that these have mostly been edited out of our Christian tradition. One that does survive accuses his new city of Constantinople of being jerry-built and claims that he built two new pagan temples there. The same writer claims that Constantine only became Christian in order to gain absolution for the

---

<sup>15</sup> Most recently Jonathan Bardill, *Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2012), and in an edited German volume published in 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Cyril Mango, ‘Constantine’s mausoleum and the translation of relics’, in Mango, *Studies on Constantinople* (Aldershot, 1993). V.

deaths of his son and his wife. Another pagan writer attacks him for neglecting military security. The voice of opposition can still be heard enough for us to know that it was loud, and it was there.

I have been interested in this lecture in two things: the sheer ambiguity of the surviving historical evidence, especially the amount of rhetoric and ‘spin’ in contemporary writing, and secondly, in the personal pressures inherent in any position of power. To this Constantine was no exception. Like the new Archbishop, and especially the new pope, he was faced with the issue of how to deal with his predecessors (and indeed his rivals). Unlike them, he solved it by warfare. His wife and his eldest son mysteriously disappeared. He had to play several hands at the same time – nowhere is this more apparent than in his legislation, which is by no means as Christian as one might expect. He did not make himself head of the church – he liked to call himself ‘the bishop of those on the outside’, which just might be a Constantinian joke. He was surrounded by eager bishops, and he made Christianity political, but he did not make the empire officially Christian (and could not, when more than ninety per cent of its population was still pagan). He closed two or three pagan temples but, whatever Eusebius claims, he did not attempt to suppress the rest, and he built a new city, Constantinople, in which (apart from his own mausoleum) he was more interested in the palace and the hippodrome, adorned with classical statues, than in building

churches; it took many decades before it could be regarded as a fully Christian city.<sup>17</sup>

My theme has not been about establishment, or about the relations between church and state, but about something else that is very much to the fore in our contemporary world, namely the ambiguities of public life and the dangers of believing what we read. In the centuries after Constantine's death Byzantine writers transferred his vision and his victory to Constantinople, while in the west, he was said to have been baptized by the pope and later again a forged document supposedly proved that he had bestowed the western empire on the pope of Rome. As for Constantine's own lifetime, substitute modern newspapers, or better, the media, for Eusebius and the others who wrote about Constantine and projected their own wishes onto him, and we might well be in the twenty-first century.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>17</sup> Eusebius says it was completely Christian.

