

THE SACRED AND PROFANE CITY

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*Defending Constantine: The Twilight of
an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom*

by Peter J. Leithart (Downers Grove,
IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010)

Constantine, Peter Leithart notes, has been a “whipping boy for a long time, and still is today” (9). In Leithart’s genealogy, an anti-Constantinian impulse can be variously discerned among church fathers and Francis of Assisi, as well as in Reformation, Enlightenment, and post-Enlightenment thought (306). It has also been influential within certain strands of contemporary Christian political and moral theology, particularly the writings of John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and their followers. It is these anti-Constantinian thinkers, especially Yoder, who serve as the backdrop for Leithart’s project.

Constantinianism, as formulated by Yoder, is less focused on the particular deeds of the emperor than the ecclesiological challenges emblemized in his Christianizing of the empire. Above all, Yoder charges that a Constantinian order undermines the capacity of the church to stand as “an alternative to the wider society” (311). The problem with Yoder’s argument, Leithart maintains, is that it lacks historical grounding. Yoder has sought to warrant a normative theological claim, based on the Anabaptist tradition, by

means of a historical narrative about the “fall of the church” (316). Yoder thus relies on an a priori historical account that blinds him to the “intellectual, legal, and constitutional context in which Constantine arose” (182).

It is the ideologically charged manner in which Constantine has been invoked by his theological critics that animates Leithart. As Leithart notes, “Theological critics of Constantine have surprisingly little to say about the historical context in which Constantine rose to the purple” (28). As such, this book is most basically “a rather old-fashioned” historical study organized around enduring questions of concern to Constantine scholars (9). What was the nature of Constantine’s conversion? Did he place the church under the political control of the state? What impact did Constantine have on the Roman Empire and the subsequent trajectory of European culture?

Yet the book’s concerns are not merely historical because, in Leithart’s assessment, Yoder’s distorted account of Constantine undermines his larger theological project (11). History, in this respect, blurs with theology, not only in Yoder’s work but equally so in Leithart’s response. While historical concerns constitute the major part of *Defending Constantine*, Leithart’s ultimate objectives are theological. In recovering an authentic historical account of Constantine in his fourth-century context, Leithart sets the stage to address “a whole series of perennial political-theological questions: about religious toleration and coercion, about the legitimacy of Christian involvement in political life, about a Christian ruler’s relationship to the Church, about how Christianity should influence civil law, about the propriety of violent coercion, about the legitimacy of empire” (11). This is a book about Constantine, to be sure, but it is just as much a book about Yoder, political

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theology, and the witness of contemporary churches.

Leithart makes no pretensions to being a specialist in ancient or early church history, though a deft reading of primary and secondary sources allows him to advance a nuanced and compelling account of Constantine. The book's historical argument is a significant achievement in its own right and stands as an important corrective to the many distorted characterizations of Constantine, both scholarly and popular. For those whose concerns are principally historical, Leithart's book offers a useful, highly readable, and engaging account "of one of the epic lives in Western history, full of firsts and foundings" (10).

There are several key points at which Leithart challenges Yoder's historical assumptions in an attempt to reassess Constantine's legacy for Christian political thought. Some of Leithart's most interesting comments concern Constantine's approach to religious freedom (chapter 5). "John Howard Yoder to the contrary," Leithart writes, "Constantine did not decide that everyone in the empire had to become a Christian," but was rather serious about giving freedom to pagans (112). How then to make sense of Constantine's suppression of sacrifice, his antiheresy legislation, and his treatment of the Jews? These actions suggest what Leithart describes as "a fundamental incoherence at the heart of Constantine's religious policy" (139). Yet Leithart equally suggests that these inconsistencies become more explicable (if not entirely coherent) if Constantine's approach to religious freedom is not viewed through the prism of modern notions of neutrality. While Constantine "retained the virtues of toleration," he equally "saw this freedom as a time for conversion" (141). Constantine thus emerges in Leithart's creative account as an illiberal theorist of religious freedom, more principled and consistent than Locke.

Leithart does not pursue this argument in detail, but his argument holds important implications for our understanding of Christendom, particularly in its relationship to the liberal tradition.

Leithart takes up similar themes in analyzing Constantine's approach to law (chapters 9 and 10). Some of the book's most significant insights are contained in these chapters, as they pertain to both the historical Constantine and the political theology Leithart is preparing to offer. Leithart reads Constantine's jurisprudence as part of the working out of the relationship between Christianity and the Roman Empire, and Christianity and politics more generally. In particular, Leithart proposes that Constantine inaugurated an "evangelical" approach to lawmaking in which Christian influences shaped "the very structures of the civil order so as to render them more just and more compassionate" (232). By banning gladiatorial events, reforming aspects of family law, and protecting the legal rights of the weak, Constantine had a major hand in the moral reshaping of Roman law and society. Leithart is careful to emphasize that there is little evidence Constantine understood himself to be engaged in the Christianization of law. Constantine "almost never cited explicit Christian or biblical justification for a law" (201), and his "laws were more often Christian in effect than intent" (304). Yet both through his own lawmaking and, most significantly, by granting legal space to the church, Constantine opened law to the moral judgment of the gospel. Thus contra Yoder, Leithart argues that Constantine did not so much subsume the church to the state as undermine the pretensions of the state by placing it into a dialectical relationship with the church.

As significant as are these historical claims, the core of Leithart's book is the development

of an alternative political theology to that of Yoder's anti-Constantinianism. Leithart does less along these lines than I had expected, as he never fully transfers from history to constructive theology. All the same, *Defending Constantine* outlines an intriguing account of the relationship between Christianity and politics that invites significant further reflection.

I take the organizing principle of Leithart's political theology to be desacralization. It is by means of this concept that Leithart links his normative theology to Constantine. At the heart of Constantine's political legacy, Leithart argues, was the ending of pagan sacrifice and thus the loosening of political and civic identity from the sacrificial act. Constantine secularized the state through his deeds, much as Herbert Markus argues Augustine did through his theology. This desacralization inaugurated a civilizational shift in which the state was deprived of eschatological significance and left radically relativized in light of Christian proclamation. The legal and political history of the West might be read as a footnote to this Constantinian legacy, and Constantine might well be read as the first anti-Constantinian.

Leithart does not explore in detail the full theological implications of these claims, but he does intimate that Constantine's life introduced into history the truth that secular politics finds its proper meaning, indeed its very foundation, in Christianity. Only Christianity, which offers the church as "an alternative society and polity," can desacralize the political and sustain the secular (304). It is from this starting point that we might understand Leithart's somewhat cryptic claim that Constantine is "a model for Christian political practice" (11). Going forward, the task of political theology might then be understood as a continued working out of this insight within the contingencies

of particular historical moments. Leithart provides few specifics about the form this work should now assume, but he is adamant that the vocation of the state must be discerned in light of a nondualistic theology that denies any ontological autonomy to the political (316). Yet it is precisely here that I wish that Leithart had expanded the depth and scope of his analysis by considering how these foundational claims might inform the posture of the contemporary church. Is the modern liberal state an extension of, or deviation from, the Constantinian achievement? Is there a distinction between secularism and secularity? Above all, what would it mean to "baptize" the late modern legal and political order as Constantine baptized Rome? In the end, Leithart is perhaps all too modest in advancing the conclusion seemingly pregnant within his argument, namely, that a theological consummation of secular politics—a new Christendom, if you will—is needed to bring coherence to the liberal project.