

2-2015

Book Review: John D. Roth (ed.), Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate. Reviewed by Travis Pickell.

Travis Ryan Pickell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs>



Part of the **Christianity Commons**

John D. Roth (ed.), *Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013). xvi + 200 pp. £16.00, ISBN 978-1-61097-819-4 (pbk).

Reviewed by: Travis Ryan Pickell, University of Virginia, USA.
Email: travispickell@virginia.edu

How are we to understand the historical and theological legacy of Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor? Some would say that his conversion signals the initiation of a ‘Constantinian shift’ in the church’s self-understanding, the adoption of a heretical Christendom mentality. This shift, marked by an unsavoury union of church and empire, ultimately meant that the church forsook the peaceful politics of Jesus and adopted the worldly politics of the sword. ‘Constantinianism’, thus understood, equals the fall of the church. And given what we know about his life – he was, after all, responsible for the deaths of his father-in-law, two brothers-in-law, one wife, and one son, to name only a few – it may be asked in what sense we should even concede the name ‘Christian’ to this man. Such a perspective on Constantine and his legacy – which is widespread in Christian ethics today – is most closely associated with the work of the late Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. It is precisely this view that was vigorously challenged by Peter J. Leithart’s *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (IVP, 2010). Leithart’s book had a two-fold aim, at once historical and theological. The historical aim was to rebut popular caricatures of the man, Constantine. The theological aim, which was primary, was to dismantle Yoder’s declensionist ‘fall’ narrative and to offer an alternative political theology in which Constantine provides ‘a model for Christian political practice’ (Leithart, p. 11).

This is all back-story to the volume under review, edited by John D. Roth, Professor of History at Goshen College and editor of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. This book contains eleven essays that critically engage Leithart’s *Defending Constantine*, in addition to a foreword by Stanley Hauerwas and an afterword by Leithart himself. While all of the articles defend Yoder – or the basic Yoderian project – against Leithart’s critiques, each essay offers unique contributions to the debate. Cumulatively, the essays in *Constantine Revisited* place the key historical and theological issues in stark relief, allowing for greater precision and ultimately advancing the discussion in important ways. Rather than summarise each chapter, I will focus on three of the most comprehensive and representative. Then I will highlight some of the recurring themes that appear in the remaining essays before offering an evaluation of the volume as a whole.

The first two chapters set the stage admirably by focusing, respectively, on Leithart’s theological and historical arguments. In the first chapter John Nugent declares, ‘Leithart fails to appreciate the true basis for Yoder’s Constantinian critique and therefore lodges accusations against him that do not stand under careful cross-examination’ (p. 5). Nugent identifies five such faulty arguments, addressing the first at great length. In *Defending Constantine*, Leithart had argued that Yoder was wrong in identifying a ‘Constantinian

Shift' in church history (at most there was a Constantinian *moment*, says Leithart); blinded by a typically Anabaptist historiography, Yoder overstated the degree of consensus on pacifism in the early church and New Testament, and read the historical evidence of Constantine's faith uncharitably. Against this characterisation, Nugent demonstrates that Leithart missed the actual basis of Yoder's position, which was 'rooted in a robust reading of the full biblical narrative' (p. 9) rather than being the product of Anabaptist-coloured lenses. Further, Nugent challenges Leithart's reading of the supposed ambiguity in the New Testament regarding military service. Specifically Nugent argues that the biblical stories of the conversion of Gentile soldiers are not about the compatibility of soldiering with Christianity so much as they are about the radical inclusivity of the Gospel. Finally, Nugent argues that Leithart fundamentally misunderstands Yoder's use of the term 'Constantinian' in so far as he tried to defend Constantine by establishing the sincerity of his Christian conversion. Constantinianism is not about sincerity or insincerity, but rather 'the willingness of God's people to deform their specific God-given identity by merging with worldly power structures and using top-down, coercive, worldly power to accomplish what God has given his people to do without such power' (p. 13). We might pause to note here that Nugent seems to confuse Leithart's aim in establishing the sincerity of Constantine's belief. For Leithart is simultaneously taking on multiple opponents and attempting to accomplish multiple goals. It seems to this reader that Leithart's point in defending Constantine's Christianity is not to deflect Yoder's charge of Constantinianism. Rather, he aims to correct certain popular misconceptions about the historical biography of Constantine, and to set the stage for his own positive political theology, which begins with the question, 'What do you do when the emperor converts?'

Nugent easily dispatches other arguments made by Leithart, including the latter's suggestion that Yoder was himself 'Constantinian' in his historical methodology and in his tendency to make the emperor the centre of church history. These claims, while creative and rhetorically effective, ultimately miss the mark. Nugent also adequately deflects Leithart's critique of Yoder's exegesis of Jeremiah and Ezra (namely, that Yoder overplays 'diaspora' themes while underplaying 'restoration' themes) by pointing out that (a) Yoder's reading of these books is made more defensible when one keeps in mind Yoder's Christological hermeneutic, and that (b) Yoder offered these readings in a section entitled 'Further Testing', thereby revealing their provisional nature. The final critique Nugent takes up is the charge that Yoder is blind to how Jesus is relevant to governing authorities. Nugent rightfully points out the oddity of making such a claim without ever addressing Yoder's 'most complete statement of the Church's relationship to the state' (p. 23), *The Christian Witness to the State*.

Nugent's theological critique is followed by Alan Kreider's equally forceful historical critique. According to Kreider, 'in area after area there were numerous shifts between the Christianity that preceded Constantine and the Christianity that came in his wake' (p. 26). There were, indeed, two recognizable 'gestalts' that we might reasonably label 'Early Christianity' and 'Christendom' (p. 27). To prove his point, Kreider focuses on early Christian views towards military service, baptismal practices, and mission. Kreider first notes a number of flaws in Leithart's characterisation of early Christian views of military service. According to Kreider, Leithart focuses too narrowly on explicit military service, ignoring the wider context of church practices that encouraged 'an ecosystem of peace' (p. 30) as well as broader 'systematic' repudiations of killing in all forms (p. 32).

Kreider also shows, *pace* Leithart, that Christians did not flock to military service once Constantine abolished the emperor cult. Moreover, whereas Leithart had relied on a strategy of demonstrating ambiguity and disagreement in the early church regarding participation in the military, in order to claim further ‘continuity’ between later just war thinkers and some portion of the early church, Kreider demonstrates that the key shift occurred in exactly *who* was arguing *what*. In 210 CE, laity were arguing that military service was legitimate; in 419 CE, this had become the argument of the bishops! In Kreider’s words, ‘Continuity, in which change filters upwards, is nevertheless a shift’ (p. 40, n. 46).

Perhaps most persuasively, Kreider shows how the church orders, which were essentially ‘handbooks for leaders...[on] worship, communal life, and ethics’ (p. 32), show a noticeable shift regarding the *explicit* rejection of killing in military service in a way that cannot be explained by geographical differentiation. Leithart’s disregard for the church orders is problematic because it reveals a deeper inattention to the way in which church practices, such as pre-baptismal catechesis, functioned as an extensive method of ‘resocialization’ (p. 43). It is precisely this neglect of actual church practices that allows Leithart to place so much weight on Constantine’s ‘conversion’, while virtually ignoring the fact that he delayed baptism until his final days. The fact that Constantine was not baptised until the end of his life – at which time he had a profound experience and hung up the purple forever – should draw our attention to the following fact: the type of Christian Constantine initially became – ‘self-taught, solitary, and unbaptized’ (p. 45) – was precisely the type that would allow him to be ‘Christian’ while avoiding the radical resocialization of the church. In other words, ‘[Constantine] wanted to set his own terms’ (p. 45).

William T. Cavanaugh takes a different approach in the fourth chapter, ‘What Constantine Has to Teach Us’. Cavanaugh focuses on Leithart’s ‘pedagogical’ understanding of the biblical narrative and church history. According to Cavanaugh, ‘Leithart is right to read church history pedagogically, as a movement toward greater maturity in Christ. Unfortunately, however, he is wrong to think that maturity means a greater ability to wield the sword’ (p. 84). Cavanaugh prefers to ‘read the church’s reaction to Constantine’s conversion not as either the faithful recognition of God’s long-awaited triumph over the Romans or the selling out of the church to power, but as the church muddling through a wholly unanticipated set of circumstances and learning some lessons in the process’ (p. 86). From this angle, the real question is, what is the lesson of history? For Leithart the trajectory of the biblical narrative and church history reveal ‘greater access to the means of war as [God’s people] mature’ (p. 92). For Cavanaugh – and Yoder – it signals a ‘movement toward the renunciation of violence’ (p. 96).

Beyond these three chapters, *Constantine Revisited* includes strong contributions by D. Stephen Long, Mark Thiessen Nation, Jonathan Tran, and others. That many of the essays were originally published as review articles in separate journals probably accounts for the tendency of these chapters to retread the same ground in a way that can feel repetitive for the reader. Most of the essays acknowledge the strengths and contributions of *Defending Constantine*, including Leithart’s highlighting of the importance of the Diocletian persecution, the diversity and the goods of the Middle Ages, and the important differences between Eusebius and Augustine, whom Yoder tends to conflate. Certain strong critiques reappear throughout. These include: (1) the

distorting effect of Leithart's excessively polemical tone (Nugent, Long, Collier); (2) a weak account of the political significance of Jesus and the crucifixion (Nugent, Long, Cavanaugh, Parler, Collier); (3) an over-reliance on sources sympathetic to Constantine, particularly Eusebius (Nugent, Nation, Tran, Parler); (4) lack of attention to Yoder's extensive Old Testament scholarship (Nugent, Parler); and (5) a truncated understanding of 'sacrifice,' which obscures the sacrificial nature of killing in warfare (Cavanaugh, Long, Parler, Collier, Hovey).

This is not a book for the uninitiated. That is not necessarily a knock against it. The level of scholarship is very high, which is a service to those who know what is at stake in the 'Constantinian Debate', but have been frustrated by, in the words of Cavanaugh, 'the lazy assumptions and slogans on both sides' (p. 84). The volume as a whole is a sustained and serious engagement, pulled off in a tone of collegiality and generosity, including ready acknowledgement and gratitude towards Leithart for pushing the debate forward. While the book feels, at times, like a one-sided conversation (none of the essays defends Leithart's central claims), the best essays seek a mediating position between Yoder and Leithart by acknowledging the rhetorical and polemical excess of both authors, while also recognising the contributions both make to this significant debate within political theology. Those desiring a 'New Christendom' will not escape this book unscathed, but neither will those who think they can avoid the central question Leithart presses upon us: 'What do you do when the emperor converts?'