

IN THIS ISSUE

Sometime around 1570, Han Schnell, a Swiss Brethren lay minister, published a pamphlet in which he summarized a view of church history widely shared within the Anabaptist circles of his day. The Roman emperor Constantine, he wrote:

was baptized by the pope Sylvester, the Antichrist, the son of perdition, whose coming took place through the work of that same loathsome devil. Therefore he received the name Christian falsely. For the Christian church was at that time transformed into the antichristian church. . . . When Constantine assumed and accepted the name Christian . . . then the apostasy came, from which apostasy may God protect us eternally. Amen.

Schnell's deep conviction that Constantine's alleged conversion to Christianity in A.D. 312 marked the fall of the Christian church echoed a view expressed repeatedly by earlier Anabaptist writers. In his *Exposure of the Babylonian Whore*, for example, Pilgram Marpeck denounced Constantine's conversion as setting in place a fateful fusion between ecclesial and temporal power marked by the introduction of infant baptism, the substitution of Mass for the Lord's Supper, and, most troubling of all, a new readiness on the part of the church to resort to coercion and lethal violence in matters of faith. And even though *The Hutterite Chronicle* acknowledged that Constantine converted "with the good intention of doing God a service," it went on to describe the consequences as a "pestilence of deceit" that "abolished the cross and forged it into a sword."

Although individual Anabaptists differed about the exact date of the church's apostasy—Menno Simons, for example, regarded it as happening even before Constantine, whereas others dated it to the late fourth-century reign of Theodosius, or even to the official sanctioning of infant baptism by the ninth-century pope, Nicholas I—Free Church theologians and historians since the Reformation have generally regarded Constantine as a symbolic marker of a fundamental shift in the history of Christian faith and practice. Constantine's conversion set in motion a process that would create the "Holy" Roman Empire, enlist the civil authority of the state in the church's prosecution of heresy, entrench infant baptism as an orthodox practice (to be defended with the threat of capital punishment), and transform the very character of Christian catechesis and missions.

Although debates over church-state relations continue to rage, few contemporary Catholic or mainline Protestant scholars today would openly advocate a return to the theocratic vision of Christendom often associated with Constantine's conversion. Thus, it bears notice—perhaps especially so in the United States, where claims of divine favor on a Christian nation have long served to sanction military interventions and to defend an imperial mandate—when a prominent contemporary theologian writes a book titled *Defending Constantine* that intends to challenge head-on the assumption that Constantine's conversion was somehow problematic in the development of Christian history.

On the surface, Peter J. Leithart's *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (InterVarsity Press, 2010) is simply a work of historical revisionism—a critical reassessment of the historiography of the Roman emperor Constantine. Beyond that, as Leithart himself acknowledges, the book also has a more “practical” aim: “Far from representing a fall for the church,” he writes, “Constantine provides in many respects a model for Christian political practice” (11).

But the primary target of Leithart's avowedly polemic work is clearly neither historical nor narrowly pragmatic. Instead, the book is intended as a sustained critique of the pacifist theology and ethics of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, and especially the writings of the well-known Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, along with Stanley Hauerwas “and their increasing tribe” of Anabaptist-oriented students (11). According to Leithart, because Yoder “gets the fourth century wrong in many particulars” it “distorts his entire reading of church history, which is a hinge of his theological project.” By exposing the presumed errors of Yoder's understanding of Constantine, Leithart seeks to undermine the entire edifice of his theological legacy.

Ordinarily, we at *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* have assumed that the proper place to debate the merits of recent publications is in the Book Review section of the journal. But because Leithart's intentions in *Defending Constantine* are so explicitly polemical, his arguments so sweeping, and the critical reception of the book so positive in mainstream evangelical circles, it seems appropriate for those in the Free Church tradition to respond to his claims more broadly.

This issue of *MQR* is therefore devoted to an extended conversation about the history of the Christian church in the fourth and fifth centuries, with particular attention to the role of the emperor Constantine. Although the primary point of departure for the essays is Leithart's *Defending Constantine*, the themes addressed here are wide-ranging,

touching on history, theology, biblical interpretation, and, of course, social ethics.

I am deeply grateful to the four scholars who stepped forward to engage the conversation. **John Nugent**, a professor of Old Testament at Great Lakes Christian College, challenges each of Leithart's primary criticisms of Yoder. He is especially clear that Yoder's analysis of Constantine's role in the "fall" of the church was framed within a much deeper narrative of biblical history in which God has always been calling his people away from imperial identities to a life of vulnerability, trust, and service to all those created in God's image. **Alan Kreider**, a professor of church history and missions at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, raises significant questions about Leithart's interpretation of several key historical sources. Along the way, Kreider provides a wealth of evidence to support the argument that Constantine's reign did indeed signal a fundamental shift in the "gestalt" of Christian faith and practice, particularly in catechesis, baptism, pacifism, and mission. He also presses Leithart on the fundamental question—which Leithart virtually ignores in the book—as to why Constantine delayed his own baptism until shortly before his death. **Craig Hovey** and **Alex Sider**, assistant professors of religion at Ashland University and Bluffton University respectively, bring a somewhat narrower focus to their responses to Leithart. Hovey's primary question is whether there is a Christian ethic for emperors different from that expected of ordinary Christians. Exactly what instructions, he asks, should a ruler take from the Gospel about how to rule? Sider probes the complex relationship of history and theology, critically engaging both Yoder and Leithart on the question of how theological commitments inform historical memory in addressing questions related to the "fall" of the church.

It was clear from the very conception of this issue that we needed to give **Peter J. Leithart**, Senior Fellow at New Saint Andrews College (Moscow, Idaho), an opportunity to respond. Leithart's rebuttal is gracious but also tenacious: precisely because Christ is king, he insists, kings should be Christians and exercise their earthly dominion in a righteous manner.

Nothing in this issue of *MQR* is likely to resolve the debate in a definitive way. But the exchange that unfolds here does push the conversation forward. And in sharp contrast to the disputations with the Anabaptists organized by state churches in the sixteenth century, it models the manner in which deep disagreements among Christians can be debated today in a spirit of Christian charity, without fear of torture, imprisonment, or death by fire, drowning, or the executioner's sword.

One final comment: the last word in the conversation that unfolds in this issue may actually come, fortuitously, in the form of a movie review that appears as the opening contribution in the Book Review section. In his reflections on the recent movie *Of Gods and Men* (*Des hommes et des dieux*), **Stephen Buckwalter** summarizes the moving story of seven Trappist monks, living in a monastery in Algeria, who found themselves caught in the crossfire of violence between radical Islamist groups and nationalist partisans in the early 1990s. In the face of threats, and then a bloody massacre, most Europeans fled the region. For the monks who had long worked among the villagers—bearing witness to Christ’s love by sharing fully in their lives—finding an appropriate response to the political crisis became a central question. Should they too leave? Should they openly declare their allegiance with the nationalists? Or should they simply continue in their long-established disciplines of prayer, offering compassionate aid to all who asked and seeking to promote understanding and reconciliation wherever possible?

Here we return to the ancient question, focused anew in *Defending Constantine*, as to whether the Christian community is obliged to provide a political narrative for those in power—a narrative that will justify the righteousness of one side of a conflict and that, presumably, will “redeem” the inevitable violence that follows by blessing it with the sanctity of God’s name. As Christian history has shown, responses to this question are never simple, especially in the face of innocent suffering. In the end, the monks of Notre-Dame de l’Atlas refuse to either flee or to submit to the logic of redemptive violence. Instead, they opt to simply continue living among the villagers, pursuing their practices of prayer and compassion. That decision sealed their earthly fate. But the sacrifice of their lives forces Christian viewers to assess anew their own convictions regarding the resurrection and the nature of true Christian witness.

For Christians committed to the Gospel of peace, *Of Gods and Men* is both inspiring and unsettling. It reminds us that Christian pacifism is never passive; nor does it come with any claims regarding short-term “effectiveness.” And for Anabaptist-Mennonite viewers in particular, the movie is a powerful and humbling reminder that the same tradition that produced Constantinianism, Christendom, and so much violence directed against their forebearers, has also carried within itself a faithful witness to an alternative understanding of the Gospel. For the gift of that witness within the Catholic Church, those in the Free Church tradition have good reason to be deeply and eternally grateful.

– John D. Roth, editor