

# BRYN MAWR CLASSICAL REVIEW

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Blandine Colot, *Lactance: penser la conversion de Rome au temps de Constantin*. *Biblioteca della rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa. Studi*, 31. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2016. Pp. xlviii, 356. ISBN 9788822264121. €48.00 (pb).

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This excellent volume aims to resituate Lactantius' work at the center of ancient Christianity, specifically in the early first half of the fourth century. The book intervenes in current debates over religious change in the Roman Empire and the role of Constantine's reign in diffusing and imposing Christianity in Roman society. It is not a theological treatise on Lactantius' thought—although his theology is frequently commented upon in the course of the argument—but a reading of this author in terms of his intellectual relationship to "pagans" of the period. The author focuses on the *Divine Institutes*, composed between 305 and 311 (prior to Constantine's victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge) but re-edited in the 320s. Blandine Colot's very clear analysis, grounded in a historical reading of the work, suggests that the "conversion of Rome" need not be conceived as a discrete historical event but as "un changement apporté à la représentation des réalités de l'histoire". We are confronted, in effect, with a history of Christian representations, yet these representations play a formative role in constructing a Christian empire.

In the Introduction, Colot stakes out a clear position on the debate between Jochen Walter and Elizabeth DePalma Digeser on the central problem in Lactantius' work.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Digeser sees his texts as advocating a "politics of inclusion" for the Emperors so as to reconcile "Christian monotheism" with "Neoplatonic monotheism", Walter

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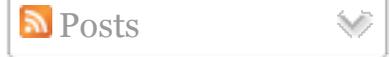
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rejects this interpretation. Rather, he stresses this Christian author's desire to demonstrate that Christianity is the only way to truth and to the true God. To choose between these theories is, for all intents and purposes, to take a position on two distinct visions of the religious relations between pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity, foregrounding either conflict or continuity and exchange. Colot aligns herself with the former perspective but, unlike the German philologist, she insists on this author's centrality to his period.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first (Chapters 1-3) focuses on the role of biblical revelation in the debate between pagans and Christians. The second (Chapters 4-6) considers Lactantius' place in the historical context of the Constantinian period.

In Chapter 1, Colot presents the strategies that Lactantius used to make Christian religion recognizable in the Empire's territories as well as to make the Bible read, and legible, among Romans of his era. The goal of his *Divine Institutes* is to show pagan readers that it is possible to be both Roman and Christian, that these identities need not conflict. This is a major reversal, in light of second- and third-century apologetics wherein the *nomen Christianus* functioned as a flashpoint for conflict with Roman authorities. Colot emphasizes this key role of identity in the fourth century. Book V is particularly important in this respect, as it reveals a metadiscursive project. Colot emphasizes the fact that at the heart of Lactantius' argument lies a "forme 'intellectuelle' du paganisme" opposed to Christianity (p. 22). Lactantius uses this version of paganism to construct his apologetic discourse. Granted that Lactantius' rhetorical construction is based on an opposition between two well-defined forms of religion, need one, however, approach it as a reflection of its period's historical reality? Or could Lactantius' construction, by portraying "Christianity" and "paganism" as two coherent religious systems (one true, one false), aim to create a more manageable opposition between them?

Lactantius' tactic is, essentially, to use pagan texts in order to prove the truth of the Christian message; only in the second part of the work does he lean heavily on biblical texts. In this regard, Colot's analysis of the term *sacramentum* is particularly illuminating. The Latin term seems to be a translation of the Greek *mysterion*, alluding to divine revelation and to grasping the true content of the biblical text. Chapter 2 goes further into the rhetorical tactics of the *Divine Institutes* and its guiding compositional principles, focusing on the question of anti-Christian persecutions. This argument is based on an analysis of three concepts: (1) *ecclesia*, which is not widely attested as a term for the Christian church as a mystical body, or at least, not widely used in this way, but as a way to link the Empire's universality to Christianity; (2) *christiani*, also a fairly rare term in the *Divine Institutes*, appearing only in explicitly polemical contexts against pagans and heretics; and, finally, (3) *iusti/iniusti*, which are widely attested and which function



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to distinguish Christians from pagans.

Chapter 3 focuses on philosophical questions with regard to the notion of justice and on Lactantius' use of Stoic thought. Here, Cicero has a central position; he becomes a virtual interlocutor in Lactantius' arguments, especially on the concepts of "natural law" and *oikeiosis* among Stoic philosophers. Colot shows that the *Divine Institutes* attempts to adapt the Christian faith to the category of *pietas*, in the sense of the natural human disposition towards justice. Unlike Cicero, Lactantius saw natural law as a direct outgrowth of the law of the true God, rather than of human reason.

Chapter 4 begins the second half of the volume, where Lactantius appears as an "acteur de son temps". Colot focuses on political theology, developing a comparison between Lactantius' ideas and those of Eusebius of Caesarea. This comparison reveals both similarities and differences between two authors who emerged from different geographical contexts and who played quite distinct political and religious roles. The author rightly emphasizes that Lactantius is the only author, in his *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, who cites Galerius' letter (311) and Constantine's letter to Licinius (313), both texts that have come to be seen as fundamental moments in the Christian transformation of the Empire. Nevertheless, Colot contends, the *Divine Institutes* (completed before 313) is also deeply concerned with the relation between Roman power and Christian theology. Further, Lactantius added two dedications in honor of Emperor Constantine in a second edition (published in 314). Whereas Eusebius advances a more "theocratic" political worldview, centered on the relation between the Roman emperor and the Christian God, Lactantius' approach is more "global": it reflects more extensively on society and its universal religious significance, above and beyond the purview of the Emperor. According to the author, Lactantius' novelty lies in giving Christianity a means to integrate itself with the Empire by taking the place of traditional civic religion. This is an essential shift, for with it, the *Divine Institutes* opened up a religious, cultural, and political project of making Christianity the new civic religion of the Empire.

In Chapter 5, Colot looks at Lactantius' approach to universal history and the religious history of humanity, examining how he represents this new history to his pagan audience. The result is an original portrait of an "apologiste historien" (p. 219), initiating a global vision of progress from one historical period to the next, with a special eye to bestowing a broader historical framework upon biblical discourse. We encounter a novel historiographical method which draws upon a wide variety of Roman, Greek, and Jewish sources. She revisits the problem of the two narratives of human origins (Books II and V) which adduce two different and, in fact, apparently incompatible schemas. Lactantius' goal is to show, "historically", how people ended up divided

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into three religious groups: pagans, Jews, and Christians. This reconstruction of human origins also conferred a new meaning on conversion to Christianity. Converting to the religion of Christ now meant returning to primal monotheism, to natural religion and, along the same lines, a "common root" was ascribed to Christians and their ancestors (p. 261).

Chapter 6 ventures into a fundamental theme in the study of this period's religious transformations: it examines how the concept of "religion" was defined in the *Divine Institutes*. Colot begins by reiterating the findings of Maurice Sachot on the term *religio* in Tertullian, yet refines them, inasmuch as she does not take the Carthaginian author's use of the Latin term to be a defining event in Western history. Here, again, Lactantius' interlocutor is Cicero, whose discussions of *religio* are quoted and commented upon in the *Divine Institutes*. The chapter concludes with a provocative sketch of Lactantius' possible influences on Christian concepts in later periods. We should not forget that Lactantius was one of the most read Christian authors of the Middle Ages, and in the Renaissance, when he received the title of "the Christian Cicero".

Blandine Colot's volume makes two major contributions. On the one hand, this is an original monograph on the *Divine Institutes* of Lactantius: their content, their narrative techniques, their political, cultural, and religious stakes. On the other hand, it enriches the debate on the Roman Empire's religious evolution at the beginning of the fourth century, when relations of power and authority among pagans and Christians were starting to shift. The analysis clearly demonstrates Lactantius' important role in constructing a Christian identity in the Latin language and highlights the distinctiveness of an author who had long been remembered as a master of rhetoric with no real religious role.

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## Notes:

1. Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) and Jochen Walter, *Pagane Texte und Wertvorstellungen bei Lactanz*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).



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