

ON THE SO-CALLED “POLITICAL THEOLOGY” OF EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA*

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In Roman history as well as in the history of the early church, the relation between Constantine the Great and Eusebius of Caesarea has always been a subject of much dispute, and in this context not only the politician-emperor has been painted black, which is rather normal (people think that politicians are always to be blamed), but also the bishop-scholar has been called “publicist of Constantine” or “court theologian” and so forth. The reason for these denigratory titles is clear: it is a fairly common assumption that in his works Eusebius published, not simply a panegyric of the emperor, but rather an ideological propaganda which some scholars tend to call “political theology”. But did Eusebius really propagate any “political theology”? The purpose of this paper is to deal with this problem.

I. *Political Theology of the Christian Empire (or the Like) and Eusebius*

Although since the time of Burckhardt Eusebius has always had his denigrators, as far as the so-called political theology is concerned the contribution of German scholarship in the 30s and 40s of the twentieth century seems the most noteworthy. Thus a classical formulation of the idea of a Christian Roman Empire can be found in a passage written by Dölger (1891-1968), who was the leader of German Byzantine studies in the first half of the twentieth century:¹

In accordance with the will of Providence the emperor Augustus succeeded in unifying the Oikumene into the Roman Empire precisely at the moment when Christ was born, in order

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¹ F. DÖLGER, “Europas Gestaltung im Spiegel der fränkisch-byzantinischen Auseinandersetzung des 9. Jahrhunderts”, in: Id., *Byzanz und die europäische Staatenwelt*, Ettal: Buch-Kunstverlag, 1953, p. 74 (originally published in Th. MAYER (ed.), *Der Vertrag von Verdun 843. Neun Aufsätze zur Begründung der europäischen Völker- und Staatenwelt*, Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1943, pp. 203-273): Nach dem Willen der Vorsehung war es dem Kaiser Augustus gelungen, die Oikumene gerade in dem Augenblick im Römischen Reiche zu vereinigen, als Christus geboren wurde, damit für die Predigt der Apostel und die Ausbreitung der christlichen, allen Meinungsstreit abschließenden Offenbarungswahrheit der politische Rahmen vorhanden sei. Dreihundert Jahre später hat dann Konstantin der Große, als alleiniger Herr der Welt, durch wunderbare Einwirkung des Himmels die christliche Lehre organisch in den römischen Staat eingebaut und damit das weltumspannende römisch-christliche Reich als unvollkommenes Abbild des himmlischen Reiches Christi geschaffen; in diesem Reiche hat der irdische βασιλεύς und ἀτοκράτωρ als Stellvertreter Christi, der als Abbild des himmlischen παμβασιλεύς und παντοκράτωρ nur einer sein kann, die Leitung aller menschlichen Dinge, der geistlichen wie der weltlichen, in seiner Hand.

that the political framework could be ready for the preaching of the apostles and for the spread of the Christian truth of revelation which was to end all conflicts of opinion. Then three hundred years later Constantine the Great, as the sole ruler of the world, integrated, through miraculous intervention of the heaven, the Christian doctrine into the Roman state and thus created the Roman-Christian Empire as an incomplete image of the heavenly kingdom. In this Empire the earthly βασιλεύς and αὐτοκράτωρ who is the representative of Christ and who can only be *alone* as the image of the heavenly παμβασιλεύς and παντοκράτωρ, controls *all* human matters, ecclesiastical as well as secular.

The same idea is also expressed by Treitinger as follows²:

The transfer from the heathen emperors to the Christian one ... was realized without any rupture in the interpretation of the position of the emperor. However, the reason for its justification had to be changed: for a long time Christianity was in conflict with the sanctification which had enveloped the position of the emperor. Thus its meaning was transformed from that of the divine emperor (*Gottkaiser*) to that of the elect, representative and envoy of God. ... This transformation of the meaning was possible only because, besides the interpretation of the emperor as divine, other notions had already been formed. Thus, for instance, in the third century Origen combined the disappearance of small nationalities under Augustus with the appearance of Christ, referring to providence. ... Eusebios, the political-theological "publicist of Constantine the Great", combined further this idea [of Origen] with the idea of peace. Thus when Augustus became the ruler over the nations, with the end of polyarchy peace was brought in. All this was realized precisely in order that the message brought upon the humanity precisely at this time by Christ could spread more swiftly over the earth.

Here Eusebius is called "publicist of Constantine", an expression which has become a kind of cliché.

To be sure, this idea of the Byzantine *Kaiseridee*³ was criticized to a certain extent. For instance, H.-G. Beck (1910-1999), who led German Byzantine studies in the period after F.

² O. TREITINGER, "Vom oströmischen Staats- und Reichsgedanken", in: ID., *Die oströmische Kaiser- und Reichsidee nach ihrer Gestaltung im höfischen Zeremoniell / Vom oströmischen Staats- und Reichsgedanken*, Darmstadt: Hermann Gentner Verlag, 1956, pp. 249-250 (originally published in *Leipziger Vierteljahrschrift für Südosteuropa* 4 (1940)): Der Übergang vom heidnischen zum christlichen Kaisertum ... vollzog sich ohne äußeren Bruch in der Auffassung der Stellung des Kaisers. Nur die Begründung dafür mußte sich wandeln, hatte doch das Christentum lange Zeit diese Heiligkeit, die nun auch sein Kaisertum umhüllte, bekämpft; der Sinngehalt wurde also umgebogen vom Gottkaiser auf den Kaiser als Auserwählten, Stellvertreter, Gesandten Gottes. ... Dieses Umbiegen des Sinngehaltes war nur möglich, weil sich neben der Auffassung vom Gottkaisertum bereits andere Vorstellungen gebildet hatten. So hatte etwa Origenes im 3. Jahrhundert das Aufhören der Nationalstaatlichkeit unter Augustus providentiell mit dem Erscheinen Christi in Zusammenhang gebracht. ... Eusebios, der politisch-theologische Publizist Konstantins d. Gr., brachte damit weiterhin den Gedanken des Friedens zusammen: Als Augustus Herr über die Nationalitäten wurde, zog mit dem Ende der Vielherrschaft auch Friede ein. All dies geschah nur, um die Botschaft, die Christus zu eben dieser Zeit der Menschheit brachte, mit um so größerer Schnelligkeit auf dem Erdkreis zu verbreiten.

Concerning the notion of *Gottkaiser* mentioned by Treitinger, see W. ENSSLIN, *Gottkaiser und Kaiser von Gottes Gnaden* (Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Jahrgang 1943, Heft 6), München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1943.

³ I think that the idea of a Christian Roman Empire or that of the Byzantine emperor (*Kaiseridee*) are mutually interchangeable.

Dölger, published a treatise titled "Res Publica Romana", in which he argued that the *Kaiseridee* did not play any role in the real process of Byzantine political history, and that it only served as an explanation *ex post facto* for justification of the outcome of the process; as Beck put it, the *Kaiseridee* can be "erased as a a-posteriori element with interpretative function" from the real political process⁴. This criticism seems to have been accepted.

However, the fact that the *Kaiseridee* was thus played down does not necessarily mean that it is deemed useless for historical analysis. For instance, a recent French translation of Eusebius' *De laudibus Constantini* is titled "La théologie politique de l'Empire chrétien"⁵. The evident implication of this title is that Eusebius propagated the "political theology of the Christian Empire". The expression "political theology" here used can be equated with the aforementioned terms such as the idea of a Christian Roman Empire or the Byzantine *Kaiseridee*; all these amount to more or less the same thing.

Although the exact term like "political theology" or "*Kaiseridee*" is not used, the same idea is clearly expressed also in a passage of a recent book of G. Dagron⁶:

As a theoretician, Eusebios had to respond to the massive problem of a Roman *universalitas* which had previously been political and was now religious. He devised a theological structure in which the supreme God was creator of the world, and where the Logos, His son, necessary mediator between divine unity and the multiplicity of creation, introduced into the world the principles of reason and order which saved it from anarchy. In exact parallel, the emperor who had been converted to Christ's doctrine was also an intermediary. Inspired by the true philosophy and *mimesis*, he modelled himself in the image of celestial kingship and was delegated by the Logos to govern humans ... In this, Eusebios was not wholly original. ... But he was one of the first to have made the Logos of God in his organising role central to his speculations, and to have constructed a veritable 'political theology' not only on the correspondence between a unique divine royalty and a unique human kingship, extended to the furthest limits of earth, but also on a synchronism between the appearance of the Logos and the establishment of the monarchy of Augustus.

Thus while the so-called *Kaiseridee* had no role in the actual political process of the Roman (or Byzantine) Empire, still the idea itself is considered relevant in other contexts (e.g. political thought of Byzantine intellectuals), and what is important for our investigation is that Eusebius of Caesarea, "publicist of Constantine", is generally regarded as the author of this idea. So it is important to see whether Eusebius really propagated such an idea or not.

⁴ H.-G. BECK, *Res Publica Romana. Vom Staatsdenken der Byzantiner* (Sitzungsberichte der Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 1970, Heft 2), München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1970, p. 10.

⁵ P. MARAVAL (transl.), *Eusèbe de Césarée. La théologie politique de l'Empire chrétien. Louanges de Constantin (Triakontaétérikos)*, Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2001.

⁶ G. DAGRON, *Emperor and Priest. The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 131-132. Underlines are mine.

II. *Hellenistic Political Philosophy*

It is argued that the so-called “political theology”, or the *Kaiseridee*, derives from Hellenistic political philosophy on divine kingship. It is N.H. Baynes who argued for the first time that these two ideas are connected⁷, and since then many studies have been published on the subject.

It would suffice here to refer to an overview of the problem made by G.F. Chesnut. According to him, Plutarch who belonged to Middle Platonism, Seneca who was a Stoic philosopher, and Philo the Jew who was under the strong influence of Middle Platonism, all present as the image of the ideal king someone endowed with the divine logos as well as virtues. In other words, the idea of the emperor as embodiment of the divine law or logos was not limited to some specific current of thought, but rather belonged to the general intellectual atmosphere of the time⁸. As Chesnut argues, this notion was also inherited by Eusebius, who applied it to the *Alleinherrschaft* of Constantine and asserted that his rule was an icon of the monarchical rule of God⁹.

Chesnut also adduces the influence of apocalyptic eschatology as something which influenced the formation of Eusebius’ political theology¹⁰. But on this point Chesnut’s discussion needs to be modified, because various studies show that Eusebius is extremely reticent as far as apocalypticism or eschatology is concerned¹¹; thus Chesnut’s discussion, which refers in this context to many passages related to apocalypticism or eschatology, is quite misleading.

Thus what can be retained concerning the so-called “political theology” of Eusebius is especially the notion that, since God is one and unique, the emperor as the viceroy of God on earth can only be one and unique. So the problem is whether such an idea was really propagated by Eusebius or not.

III. *De laudibus Constantini of Eusebius*

The work of Eusebius which should be examined here is his *De laudibus Constantini*, a discourse delivered in celebration of the feast of Tricennalia of Constantine in 335 or 336. Truly the occasion would have been an ideal one if Eusebius really wanted, not simply to

⁷ N.H. BAYNES, “Eusebius and the Christian Empire”, in: ID., *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974 (repr. of 1955), pp. 168-172 (originally published in *Annuaire de l’Institut de philologie et d’histoire orientales* 2 (1933-1934), pp. 13-18). Baynes’ argument is accepted in F. DVORNIK, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy*, 2 vols., Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1966, p. 619 (continuous pagination).

⁸ G.F. CHESNUT, *The First Christian Histories: Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius*, 2. ed., Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986, pp. 151 (Plutarch), 155 (Seneca), 157 (Philo).

⁹ CHESNUT, p. 159.

¹⁰ CHESNUT, p. 164.

¹¹ M.J. HOLLERICH, “Religion and Politics in the Writings of Eusebius: Reassessing the First “Court Theologian””, *Church History* 59 (1990), p. 310 n. 3. See also G. PODSKALSKY, *Byzantinische Reicheschatologie*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1972, p. 12. Furthermore, Chesnut himself mentions Eusebius’ contemptuous attitude toward a literal or materialistic interpretation of the Apocalypse made by Papias (CHESNUT, p. 165).

present a panegyric, but to propagate a new idea (or ideology) of a Christian Roman Empire.

Before proceeding to a detailed analysis of the text, however, one question needs to be posed: did an old man like Eusebius, who was at that time well advanced in age (over 70 years), really say something innovative or revolutionary, or did he simply express the ideas which were familiar to him?

This question needs to be asked, because a frequently quoted article of J.-M. Sansterre argues that it was precisely at this time that Eusebius took a decisive step toward a new idea. According to him, Eusebians headed by Eusebius of Nicomedia had in 335 already realized the rehabilitation of Arius as well as the banishment of Nicene bishops (except for their archenemy Athanasius, who was at last banished in the autumn of 335), thus consolidating their position. And the only thing that remains is the struggle against the term *homoousios* itself. However, since *homoousios* is included in the decision of a church council, which can hardly be reversed by the decision of another council, the only practical way to achieve the goal is to put the emperor above the institution of the council (i.e., to regard the emperor as the authoritative interpreter of the divine will). This is the reason why Eusebius of Caesarea, "theoretician of the Eusebians" according to Sansterre, declared the political theology in his discourse in celebration of the Tricennalia. This is, *grosso modo*, the argument of Sansterre¹².

But this discussion of Sansterre can hardly be sustained. Even if the question whether Eusebius of Caesarea can really be called "theoretician of the Eusebians" is put aside, it is evident that Constantine himself was in favor of the use of *homoousios* in the Nicene creed¹³; otherwise such a controversial term could not have been included in the decision of the council backed by the emperor himself. Consequently, the same emperor could not have assumed such a role as the discussion of Sansterre suggests. It is safer to assume that Eusebius delivered his discourse without presenting any innovative or revolutionary ideas¹⁴.

To take a closer look at the *De laudibus Constantini* itself¹⁵, in the prologue Eusebius recommends his audience to "shun and avoid the main roads" and proposes to sing "the royal praises in a newer strain". It seems that he intends to praise the ruler of the Roman Empire as a Christian emperor, a praise which is assuredly unprecedented. However, to praise an emperor in such a way is one thing, and to proclaim a new ideology, i.e. the *Kaiseridee*, is another thing.

The purpose of the discourse is clear from ch. 1. There Eusebius proposes to praise God "who is truly supreme", and adds that the sovereign "who is present" will "join in praise of the divine teaching". This is the way Eusebius praises his hero Constantine: by praising God to whom Constantine is so devoted, he shows that his hero has made a correct and laudable choice.

In ch. 2 we find a detailed comparison between the divine Logos and Constantine: the

¹² J.-M. SANSTERRE, "Eusèbe de Césarée et la naissance de la théorie «césaropapiste»", *Byzantion* 42 (1972), pp. 584-586.

¹³ See Ch. PIETRI, "L'épanouissement du débat théologique et ses difficultés sous Constantin : Arius et le concile de Nicée", in: J.-M. MAYEUR et al. (eds.), *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. 2: *Naissance d'une chrétienté (250-430)*, Paris: Desclée, 1995, p. 269.

¹⁴ See also the discussion of F. WINKELMANN, *Euseb von Kaisareia. Der Vater der Kirchengeschichte*, Berlin: Verlags-Anstalt Union, 1991, pp. 160-162, which refers to the advanced age of Eusebius.

¹⁵ Quotations from the *De laudibus Constantini* are according to its English translation: H.A. DRAKE, *In Praise of Constantine. A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 83-102.

Logos rules endlessly, and equally “his friend ... rules on earth for long periods of years”, and so on. This comparison is purely rhetorical, and in it there is no trace of propagating a new ideology.

It is in ch. 3 that what can perhaps be called “political theology” is found. According to Eusebius, among all kinds of polity the best is monarchy, because “a polyarchy based on equality” results in “anarchy and civil war”; that is why God is one and unique.

That we are concerned with a panegyric is most clearly shown in ch. 5. Eusebius says: “let the friend of the All-Ruling God be proclaimed our sole sovereign with truth as witness”, and then he enumerates his virtues, e.g. our sovereign is “above care for money, stronger than the passion for women, victor of physical pleasures and demands, the conqueror, not the captive, of ill-temper and wrath” etc. This description of the emperor, which apparently does not reflect the reality, seems to me less laudatory than demanding.

Another passage which can be interpreted as a presentation of the “political theology” can be found in ch. 10. According to Eusebius, the sign of cross which is “truly salutary” has “eclipsed the age-old lies about the gods and consigned the error to darkness and oblivion”. Thus people of the four corners of the world “sing out a harmonious strain ... to praise one God who is over all; to acknowledge one Only-Begotten Savior ... ; and to recognize also one sovereign, rector of the earth, and his sons beloved of God.”

To sum up, the panegyric nature of the discourse is clear from ch. 5, and the image depicted there is more demanding than laudatory. And as for the propaganda, in ch. 3 and 10 there are some passages which can be relevant to our investigation. However, apparently these passages do no more than recognize the state of matter at the time of the discourse. They surely do not mean that the emperor on the earth, who they say is the icon of the unique God of the universe, can only be one and unique, for if Constantine was the sole ruler at the very moment of the discourse, the next generation, i.e. that of his sons, could not be ruled by a sole ruler, precisely because Constantine had more than one son, as is clearly shown by the discourse itself. The praise of the monarchical rule on the earth, which, admittedly, can be perceived in the discourse, applies only to the reign of Constantine, and thus is no more than a laudatory expression of the orator.

Up to now only the *De laudibus Constantine* has been examined, and one might wonder if it is also necessary to consult other works of Eusebius, especially the *Vita Constantini*. However, since the *Vita* was written after the death of Constantine, it can hardly be regarded as a suitable occasion for propagating a new ideology. It is completely inappropriate to look for arguments of the so-called “political theology” in this work¹⁶. Furthermore, according to Winkelmann who studied in detail the manuscript tradition of the *Vita*¹⁷ as well as its influence on later periods of the Byzantine Empire¹⁸, the *Vita Constantini* itself had little (if any) impact

¹⁶ Rather, the function of the *Vita Constantini* as a kind of “Mirror for Princes” (*Fürstenspiegel*) is suggested in A. CAMERON & S. HALL (transl.), *Eusebius. Life of Constantine. Introduction, translation and commentary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999, p. 12.

¹⁷ F. WINKELMANN, *Die Textbezeugung der Vita Constantini des Eusebius von Caesarea* (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, 84), Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962.

¹⁸ F. WINKELMANN, “Die Beurteilung des Eusebius von Cäsarea und seiner Vita Constantini im griechischen Osten. Ein Beitrag zur Untersuchung der griechischen hagiographischen Vitae Constantini”, in: J. IRMSCHER (ed.), *Byzantinische Beiträge*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964, pp. 91-119. See also ID., *Euseb von Kaisareia* (n. 14 above), p. 156.

on the formation of the Byzantine legend about Constantine. Such a neglected work can hardly have exerted any influence on the making of the empire-wide ideology¹⁹.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is completely wrong to consider Eusebius the author of the idea of a Christian Roman Empire or the Byzantine *Kaiseridee*. In his *De laudibus Constantini*, Eusebius simply delivered a laudatory discourse and no more. The existence of such a political idea (or ideology) does not have to be denied, but such an idea, if it existed, surely did not take form in Eusebius' mind.

It seems that the reason why such a false attribution has been made and not doubted so far, especially in the field of Byzantine studies, has to do with the very notion of the Byzantine Empire: it is normally said that the Byzantine Empire is composed of three elements, i.e. Greek-speaking people, Christianity, and the Roman Empire²⁰. And since Byzantine studies would like to set the starting point of the Byzantine Empire at the time of Constantine the Great, it would be ideal to be able to show that the Byzantine Empire launched precisely at this time together with a new idea (or ideology); it is for this reason, so it seems to me, that our bishop-scholar was invoked to assume the role of the propagator of the new idea. Furthermore, it is evident that the studies of Dölger and Treitinger etc. in the 30s and 40s of the twentieth century had an aspect of being a struggle for survival of Byzantine studies in the Nazi period, and in this context it would also have been desirable to be able to attribute the formation of the *Kaiseridee* to a concrete person.

Is the "political theology" of Eusebius not a myth created by Byzantine studies?

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¹⁹ Mention must be made here of Sirinelli's work which deals with Eusebius' view of history (J. SIRINELLI, *Les vues historiques d'Eusèbe de Césarée durant la période prénicéenne*, Paris, 1961), although the work does not deal with Eusebius' thought *after* the council of Nicaea. In ch. 11 titled "La coïncidence de l'Empire et de l'Incarnation", Sirinelli asserts that Eusebius, who inherited the idea of Origen concerning the coincidence of the rise of the Roman Empire and the birth of Christ, considered the Empire an instrument of the providence (pp. 395-397), and then argues that "l'unité romaine n'est pas autre chose que la traduction en termes politiques de la monarchie chrétienne" (p. 404). It is evident that Sirinelli's interpretation fits well with the so-called "political theology". However, these pages of Sirinelli's discussion contain much fewer footnotes than the rest of the book, and I cannot help thinking that Sirinelli's discussion is based on his own preconception, rather than on Eusebius' thought.

²⁰ A classical expression of this definition of the Byzantine Empire can be found in A. HEISENBERG, "Staat und Gesellschaft des byzantinischen Reiches", in: *Staat und Gesellschaft der Griechen und Römer bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters*, 2. ed., Leipzig: Teubner, 1923, p. 364: Byzanz ist das christlich gewordene Römerreich griechischer Nation. In dieser Trinität liegen die tiefsten Wurzeln seines Wesens beschlossen.