Interview with Jonathan Hill
Author of Christianity: How a Despised Sect from a Minority Religion Came to Dominate the Roman Empire

Fortress Press: Many histories of the early church have been theological or intellectual histories, or sometimes institutional histories, while newer ones seem to emphasize social history. How would you characterize your approach in Christianity, and what has it taught you about the relationship of these elements in Christian life generally?

Jonathan Hill: I’ve tried to provide an integrated story that takes into account things such as theology, spiritual practice, and the political and social context, to try to give a flavor of what life in the early church was all about. Of course, the most we can hope for is just a flavor! But I do think it is important to maintain a balanced view, and this can help us understand the narrower elements better as well. For example, when we study the history of Christian doctrine, it can often devolve into a series of books by “great men” (and I’m afraid it usually is men)—in this period, that would be people such as Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, and so on. That runs the risk of seeing Christian doctrine as a sort of academic pursuit, done by these intellectuals in a rarefied atmosphere. But in fact, of course, all of those theologians were church members or church leaders, and they represented thriving communities. We cannot understand Augustine, for example, unless we think of him in the context of his church in Hippo, where he was bishop, or the monastic communities that he lived in for much of his life, and the concerns and spiritual experiences of the other people in those communities that influenced and shaped his own thoughts and experiences just as much as his reading of earlier “great men” did. That’s not to downplay the importance of people like Augustine as innovators, of course—they weren’t just mouthpieces for their churches. But it’s a complex process.

That goes for modern Christian life too, of course. For both great theologians and ordinary believers alike, the life of faith involves both theory and practice, and they both inform each other. There’s nothing unique about that to religion. Just think of politics (which really has a lot in common with religion). On the one hand, you have significant individuals: party leaders, people in important posts who make decisions, theorists who write books. But where would those people be without the voters? Conversely, what would the voters do without legislators and decisionmakers to vote for? (Perhaps it’s best not to dwell on that for too long!) The point is that politics isn’t done purely by the “great men” or by the masses. It’s done by both—it is the art of compromise. Similarly, religion is a dialogue between theologians or church leaders and the members of the congregations. Like politics, that makes it a bit messy, but it keeps it interesting, and it keeps the theologians’ feet if not entirely on the ground, at least somewhere in its vicinity.

FP: Constantine looms large in your narrative, and indeed the whole book seems to arc toward him and his role in the legitimation of Christianity. Yet today he is often demonized and the Constantinian paradigm decried as a betrayal of early Christianity. In the end is Constantine a hero or a villain? What is lost or gained in that constantinian shift?

JH: Like most real people, Constantine was neither a hero nor a villain but something in between. I do think it is a mistake to see him as nothing more than a pragmatic general or politician who
was not sincere in his conversion (as certain best-selling novelists would like us to suppose). I
don’t see any good reason to doubt that Constantine was a sincere Christian or that he was
insincere in his proclamation of religious liberty for all, no matter what their religion. It is hard to
see that proclamation as anything other than a positive. It was the only period in the history of
the Roman empire—for just a couple of decades—when people really were allowed to believe
whatever they wanted. If nothing else, Constantine was a saint compared to his son, the appalling
Constantius II.

Did he betray earlier Christianity? If you think that Christianity was, up to that point, necessarily
a minority, countercultural movement, then I suppose the answer would be yes. But why
suppose that? Christianity had its share of social conservatives as well as social radicals. You can
see that in the New Testament itself. Paul, writing before the outbreak of state hostility against
the church, told his readers that the state authorities were ordained by God and must be obeyed.
John of Patmos, writing later, denounced the Roman empire as the “whore of Babylon” and
bitterly attacked those Christians who he thought were too cozy with it. John would have been
appalled by Constantine and his age; Paul might have been much more comfortable with him. In
later ages, for every Tertullian insisting that it was immoral for Christians to join the army and
march under a secular flag, you had a Clement of Alexandria repeating for Christian consumption
the standard, secular moral codes of ordinary aristocratic society on everything from sex to
polite behavior in the bath. To suppose that Constantine betrayed earlier Christianity is to make
earlier Christianity a more simple and monolithic movement than it really was.

One other point is that perhaps the importance of Constantine is sometimes overstated, in part
because the influence of Greek and Roman culture is sometimes overstated. Most of us in the
west are the cultural descendants of northern European culture—the Germanic or Scandinavian
cultures, for example, that the Romans regarded as barbarous. Americans today speak a
Germanic language, not a Latin-derived one, and wear clothes that have more in common with
those of the ancient Celts and Germans than with classical togas (except for student parties of the
more interesting variety, of course). Naturally, Greek and Roman culture did have a huge impact
on later Europe, but that impact was overestimated by enthusiasts in the Renaissance and later
by upper-class Englishmen given classical educations at elite schools.

Now Constantine’s conversion was certainly hugely significant for the Roman empire. But we
shouldn’t therefore assume that it was equally significant for subsequent wider history. It made
little difference to Christianity in the Persian empire and further east. And in the early Middle
Ages, the Church of the East was bigger than the Catholic and Orthodox churches put together. It
made more of a difference to western Christianity, of course, where the cultural heritage of
Rome, including its religion, remained very important for centuries. But despite that, Europe
would have become Christian even if the Roman empire had never converted, because the
Germanic “barbarians” were being converted anyway through the efforts of missionaries such as
Ulfilas. These “barbarians,” not the Romans, would lay the basis for medieval and modern Europe
after the collapse of the empire in the west. If the Roman empire had never converted, then
certainly the process of Christianization would have been different, and perhaps Christianity
would have developed differently in Europe. But I think the differences would have been less
than we instinctively suppose.
FP: Much of your prior work has been in philosophy, and your work masterfully portrays the ongoing dilemma of philosophical reflection both within the church and within the empire. What do you think the early church writers—philosophers and theologians—would make of our modern question of God? Would our atheism debates make any sense to them?

JH: Most ancient authors, whether pagan or Christian, thought that the existence of God (or more generally, the divine) was just so obvious that only an idiot could doubt it. And those who were dubious about the existence of the divine, notably the Epicureans, were regarded as fools because of it—although even the Epicureans didn’t say there were no gods, they just thought of them as natural phenomena. Modern atheism really required fundamental changes in the way people even begin thinking about the nature of the world, as governed by impersonal natural laws that are mathematically measurable and so on. And that required the rise of science in early modern times. Although, interestingly, I think that that very development was itself encouraged by the Christian belief in the rationality and comprehensibility of the world (as created by a rational God through the exercise of his Logos, or divine reason, identified with Christ). In which case, the modern scientific worldview, which for many has undermined traditional Christian theism, was itself partially the child of Christian theism. A nice irony!

In my opinion, the ancient Christian writers would have found modern debates about the existence of God largely incomprehensible—or at least they would be unable to appreciate and understand the position of the atheists.

FP: Traditionally, much of the focus of early church histories has been on Christological development, while yours places those battles in a larger social light. In the end, given the way in which post-scriptural philosophical language influenced Christian conception of Christ, would you say that the development remained authentic to the sources and significance of Jesus for his first followers?

JH: I wouldn’t put it as simply as “post-scriptural philosophical language influenced Christian conception of Christ.” I’d be inclined to say it was the other way around: The Christian conception of Christ, or more accurately the way in which the mainstream church tried to articulate this conception of Christ, led to the development of the post-scriptural philosophical language that was applied to him.

It’s sometimes thought that the development of Christian theology in the patristic era, especially in the later parts of that era, was a matter of Christians importing philosophical vocabulary into theology, and with it new ideas that influenced how they understood their faith. But that doesn’t seem to me a very accurate way of looking at it. If you look carefully at what actually happened when new vocabulary was used in the context of Christian theology, you see that people didn’t have clear ideas about what it meant, at least initially. They developed their understanding of its meaning by reflecting on the theological doctrines, not vice versa.

For example, a famous example of a post-scriptural theological term is *homoousios*, or “consubstantial,” used to describe the relation between the Father and the Son in the Symbol of Nicaea in 325 CE. That does not appear in the Bible and many people attacked it. But it wasn’t
taken from philosophy. It had appeared in the works of earlier theologians, notably Origen, but it
didn’t have any set philosophical meaning. It was chosen because it expressed an idea that the
Fathers of Nicaea wanted to protect (the perfect similarity between Father and Son) but was
ambiguous about why they had that perfect similarity The distinctively Christian understanding
of such terms was the outcome of theological development within the church and didn’t come
from the imposition of these terms from outside.

Did this process of development, clarification, and use of new terms reflect the faith of primitive
Christians? That is a very hard question to answer. Can a doctrine ever be translated into a new
context without altering it fundamentally? Certainly we see differences between the primitive
faith in Jesus and the doctrinal pronouncements of Constantinople or Chalcedon. The first
Christians believed that Jesus was returning imminently, a belief that had receded by the later
centuries. They did not have any clear conception of Jesus’ relation to the Father (or if they did,
they were coy about expressing it), whereas the later Christians did. The lack of clarity in the
texts from the first Christians, of course, makes it difficult and controversial to say whether the
later doctrinal formulations were faithful to them. I would be inclined to say that, at the very
least, the first Christians were convinced that they had encountered in Jesus the saving power of
God. The later doctrinal formulations, including those of the Trinity and the incarnation, were
intended to reflect that basic belief. So at some level we can reasonably point to common ground.
But whether the first Christians would have agreed with the later formulations, even if they
could have understood them, is impossible to say.