Lactantius’ Doctrine of Religious Freedom and Its Influence on Constantine

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Eminent historian of late antiquity Elizabeth Digeser explores how and why the prominent 4th-century African scholar Lactantius proposed a policy of religious freedom to the Emperor Constantine, and how Constantine drew on Lactantius as he gradually gained sole control over the Roman empire. Drawing on the writings of the Christian apologist Tertullian, Lactantius’ political and theological treatise, The Divine Institutes, called for official tolerance toward Rome’s Christians during the Great Persecution (303-11) and argued for a policy of religious concord as a pillar of a future Christian state. Making these arguments to Constantine and his court in Trier, Rome’s northwestern imperial capital, Lactantius persuaded the emperor that religious repression was antithetical to government under Christian law. Where the emperor Diocletian’s persecution strove for religious conformity through violence, Lactantius’ contribution to Western political thought was his argument that states could achieve religious conformity only through voluntary conversion to religious truth.