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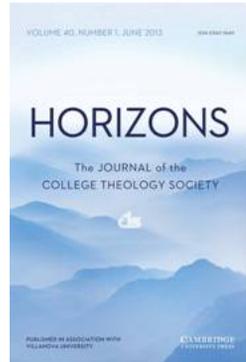
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***Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom.* By Peter J. Leithart. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010. 373 pages. \$27.00 (paper).**

Jonathan P. Stanfill

Horizons / Volume 39 / Issue 01 / March 2012, pp 140 - 141

DOI: 10.1017/S0360966900008707, Published online: 10 January 2013

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0360966900008707](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0360966900008707)

**How to cite this article:**

Jonathan P. Stanfill (2012). Horizons, 39, pp 140-141 doi:10.1017/S0360966900008707

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The broad organization of the book is both historical and theological. Curran first outlines the story of the church's social mission up to the mid-twentieth century, emphasizing its inward focus on struggling Catholic immigrants and the split between the supernatural (and clerical) mission of "divinization" and the natural (and primarily lay) mission of "humanization." Vatican II, by contrast, presents the social dimension as constitutive of the church's *one* mission to preach the Gospel, and the province of all the baptized. Curran then considers how this fundamental shift affected already-established institutions and movements, and how it has shaped the Catholic approach to social issues in the decades since the Council. Having emphasized the inclusivity—the enormous variety and ecumenical character—of the current social activity of the church, Curran moves on to discuss the various roles through which the institutional church continues to support its mission: educator, advocate, almsgiver, and model. He concludes with a review of the bishops' involvement in the abortion issue, illustrating that pursuit of this variety of institutional roles has engendered many contrasting strategies and accompanying tensions.

Although Curran emphasizes that he is presenting a theological perspective and not a history of the social mission, it is possible to lose track of that important point, especially during the first half of the book. Overall, however, Curran's central theological goals emerge clearly and eloquently. The historical illustrations underscore the fundamentally incarnational character of the mission. The church lives out its "small 'c' catholicity" in the enormous diversity of social interests and strategies it has always pursued. These pursuits, Curran insists, are followed primarily "by individuals alone or in association with others in their daily lives" (125), rather than by church institutions. All of this leads to the conclusion that "the most important aspect of the social mission of the church is the call for the church to educate and form all its members to acknowledge in theory and practice that the social mission is a constitutive and essential dimension of what it means to be a Catholic Christian" (188). This is a fitting summary of what Curran himself has accomplished in this work.

*College of the Holy Cross*

WILLIAM A. CLARK, SJ

*Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom.* By Peter J. Leithart. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010. 373 pages. \$27.00 (paper).

In this popularized biography of Constantine, Leithart marshals together the recent work by fourth-century specialists in order to repudiate the vilification of the emperor by contemporary political theologians, especially John Howard Yoder. He revisits the "traditional Constantinian questions," but he is more interested in moving beyond historical narration to reassess Constantine's theological significance. He argues that rather than signaling the "fall of the church" as Protestant critics have claimed, Constantine's legacy is

his transformation of the Roman Empire and its heirs through his “desacricing” of the Roman polity.

According to Leithart, the theological critics of Constantine have failed to appreciate the emperor’s importance in ending the horror of Christian persecution (chapter 1). Moreover, since the persecution was born out of Diocletian’s political theology and his efforts to pull the Roman Empire out of its third century crisis (chapter 2), the significance and novelty of Constantine’s political theology becomes more striking (chapter 3). In Chapter 4, Leithart argues that Constantine had a genuine conversion experience at the Milvian Bridge (following Peter Weiss’ sun halo interpretation) and subsequently pursued a sincere faith that was shaped by his central theological conviction that the Christian God was a heavenly judge who opposed those who opposed him. Next, Constantine is portrayed as a charitable “Lactantian” Christian (chapter 5), whose anti-heretical and anti-Jewish legislation was, in fact, markedly tolerant because he did not rigorously enforce it (chapter 6). Chapters 7 and 8 attempt to demonstrate that Constantine’s dealings with the bishops, especially with regard to the councils and the disunity caused by the Donatist and Arian heresies, cannot be construed as the emperor coopting the church. Then he traces the unsystematic christianization of Roman law during Constantine’s reign (chapters 9–10). The final four chapters are devoted to dismantling Yoder’s critique of Constantine (chapters 11–14). In particular, Leithart argues that the early church was not uniformly pacifist (chapter 12) and that there was no discernable shift in early Christian attitudes toward imperial power (chapter 13). The final chapter culminates with his main argument that “the Constantinian moment” in the fourth century is important because it signaled the end of sacrifice and the new centrality of the church for the Roman way of life.

While the overall work is engaging and exhaustive, Leithart still struggles to reconcile his overly sympathetic portrait of Constantine with some of the more problematic aspects of Constantine’s life. In particular, he leaves Constantine’s murder of his wife and son largely unresolved and downplays the intolerance of his religious policies. There is also a sense in which Leithart does not sufficiently grapple with Constantine’s affinity for rhetorically shaping the public perception of his life, faith, and reign. This work could be useful in discussions about the reception of Constantine’s legacy in contemporary political theology. But for a more rigorous historical treatment of Constantine’s religiosity, consider one of Leithart’s favorite scholars, Timothy Barnes and his new book, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire* (2011).

Fordham University

JONATHAN P. STANFILL

*Women in Ministry and the Writings of Paul.* By Karen M. Elliott, CPPS. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic Press, 2010. 103 pages. \$15.95 (paper).

The twofold purpose of this book, as set forth in the introduction, is to consider the important ministerial role played by women in the church