

# I

## Prelude: The Roman World Transformed (c.300–c.600)

### A CHRISTIANIZED EMPIRE

#### 1.1 Toleration or favoritism? *Edict of Milan* (313). Original in Latin.

No edict (an order issued to governors throughout the empire) was issued at Milan. But Emperors Constantine (r.306–337) and Licinius (r.308–324) met there in 313 and agreed to the provisions of what would be promulgated a few months later—the so-called *Edict of Milan*. It gave notice that Constantine and Licinius agreed to tolerate Christianity along with other religions and that they determined to restore the properties that the Church had lost under Emperor Diocletian (r.284–305). The current owners of the property might be compensated from the emperors' private funds if they applied to their "vicar," an imperial administrator with regional authority.

The *Edict of Milan* is the first source in this collection. Let us use it to begin a discussion of how to read primary sources. Each primary source calls for its own methodology and approach; there is no one way to handle all of them. Moreover, as the epigraph of this book points out, readers should bring their own special insights to old sources. Nevertheless, it is usually helpful to begin by asking a standard series of questions.

**Who wrote it, and for what audience was it written?** Normally this is fairly easy to answer, but often it is not. In this case, it seems that Emperors Constantine and Licinius conceived of the statement, though civil servants in an imperial writing office drafted and published it. The immediate recipients were provincial governors, each referred to as "your Excellency" in this document; they were expected to publish—that is, publicize—the contents to the public.

**When was it written?** Your editor has given the date 313, which is the year in which the document was issued. At this stage in your historical work, you need not worry about

how this date was arrived at. It is more important for you to consider the circumstances and historical events in the context of which this date takes on meaning. In this instance, you should be thinking that the date is pertinent to the history of the Roman Empire; that it comes directly after Constantine won a major battle at the Milvian Bridge in 312; that he attributed his victory to a sign from the Christian God; that immediately thereafter he took over administration of the western portion of the Roman Empire and soon (in 313) allied with Licinius; and that a few months later Licinius became ruler of the eastern half of the Empire. Therefore you should expect the document to have to do with both imperial authority and religion, which is precisely what you will discover when you read it.

**Where was it written?** In this case “Milan” is not the right answer. In fact the *Edict* was issued by Licinius at Nicomedia (today Izmit), in the eastern half of the Empire. But sometimes you will not know so specific an answer, and you must work with what information you have.

**Why was it written?** Often you will find a provisional answer to this question right in the text of the primary source. Ostensibly the *Edict* was written, as it says, “to give both to Christians and to all others free facility to follow the religion which each may desire.” But you should go beyond this obvious answer to ask what other motives might have been at work, what sorts of negotiations may have been involved in its writing, and who benefited.

**What is it?** In this case, you know that it is *called* an *Edict* but is something a bit different. You might choose to call it an “imperial ordinance,” an “official document,” or even a “policy statement.”

**What does it say?** This is the most important question of all. To answer it, you need to analyze the document for its various provisions, taking care to understand them fully and seeking further information (if necessary) about its vocabulary.

**What are the implications of what it says?** This requires you to ask many questions about matters that lie behind the text. Important questions to ask are: *What does the document reveal about such institutions as family, power, social classes and groups, religion, and education and literacy in the world that produced it? What are its underlying assumptions about gender; about human nature, agency, and goals; about the nature of the divine? Does the source apply to men and women in the same way?*

**How reliable is it?** If the document is authentic—if it really is what it purports to be—then at the very least you can know that it was issued by its writer(s). In this case, you can be sure that Constantine and Licinius did indeed want the *Edict of Milan* promulgated. You may wish to speculate about how much of it was Constantine’s idea and how much Licinius’s by considering what else you know about their religious convictions and political motives. The document certainly tells you about the ideals and intentions that they wanted the world to believe they had. But it alone cannot tell you whether the provisions were carried out. To know that, you need other documents and evidence about the nature of Roman imperial power at the time. One document that may help

here is the *Creed* declared by the Council of Nicaea (p. 13 below), since Constantine presided over that council.

**Are there complicating factors?** Medieval texts were all handwritten, and they were “published”—in the sense of being made public and distributed—in relatively small numbers. In many cases we do not have them in their original state. The *Edict of Milan* was issued in multiple handwritten copies in Latin. However, none of these has survived. We know its contents because it was incorporated into the writings of two Christian apologists:<sup>1</sup> Lactantius’s *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* (written perhaps in 318) and Eusebius’s *History of the Church* (the first edition of which was published at some time between 303 and 312). Eusebius’s text of the *Edict*, which he translated and presented in Greek, is not entirely the same as the one given by Lactantius. Scholars think that the one in Lactantius is the original, and that is the one printed here. But you should not be content with that. You should instead ask yourself at least two questions about these intermediary sources: *What motives might lead a later source to reproduce a text? What new meanings does the original source take on when it is embedded in a larger document with its own agenda?* You might also consider the fact that the *Edict* was not considered important enough to be drawn upon by the legal experts who compiled *The Theodosian Code* (438; see below, p. 4) or the later *Codex Justinianus* (529).

You should ask these questions of every source you read. Soon you will see how different the answers are for each document, for every one of them poses special challenges. If you like, look ahead to p. 167 to see this point clearly demonstrated in connection with a very different source, al-Tabari, *The Defeat of the Zanj Revolt*.

[Source: *Church and State Through the Centuries: A Collection of Historic Documents with Commentaries*, trans. and ed. Sidney Z. Ehler and John B. Morrall (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1954), pp. 5–6.]

We, Constantine and Licinius the Emperors, having met in concord at Milan and having set in order everything which pertains to the common good and public security, are of the opinion that among the various things which we perceived would profit men, or which should be set in order first, was to be found the cultivation of religion; we should therefore give both to Christians and to all others free facility to follow the religion which each may desire, so that by this means whatever divinity is enthroned in heaven may be gracious and favorable to us and to all who have been placed under our authority. Therefore we are of the opinion that the following decision is in accordance with sound and true reasoning; that no one who has given his mental assent to the Christian persuasion or to any other which he feels to be suitable to him

should be compelled to deny his conviction, so that the Supreme Godhead (“Summa Divinitas”), whose worship we freely observe, can assist us in all things with his usual favor and benevolence. Wherefore it is necessary for your Excellency to know that it is our pleasure that all restrictions which were previously put forward in official pronouncements concerning the sect of the Christians should be removed, and that each one of them who freely and sincerely carries out the purpose of observing the Christian religion may endeavor to practice its precepts without any fear or danger. We believed that these points should be fully brought to your attention, so that you might know that we have given free and absolute permission to practice their religion to the Christians. Now that you perceive what we have granted to them,

<sup>1</sup> An “apologist” is someone who justifies or argues in favor of a doctrine or ideology.

