

Rhetoric and Divine Honours: On the “Imperial Cult” in the Reigns of Augustus and Constantine

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*This article examines what the historians have called the “imperial cult” to describe a wide variety of homages celebrated in the imperial era for the emperor and the members of his family. From Augustus, a new religious language was organized around the imperial person on the rhetorical basis of *isotheoi timai*, of honours equal to those made to the gods. This type of amplified tribute, set up from Actium and exploiting the Caesarian heritage (*divus Julius*), founded the institutional architecture of the Principate, giving the Emperor a necessarily prominent position. In fact the cults and honours devoted to the emperor belongs to the rhetoric of power and explains in particular the great ambiguity of religious language developed around the imperial figure; it also explains the maintenance of the institution with Constantine and the Christian emperors, who kept the essential meaning of the institution based on an admittedly ambiguous ritual arsenal, but adapted to the celebration of the highest honours that shaped the imperial function.*

To the Memory of Simon Price

This article examines what the historians have called the “imperial cult” to describe a wide variety of homages celebrated for the emperor and the members of his family in the imperial era. The established cults and honours have indeed participated in a moving dialectic of power. The emperor and his subjects finally adapted to a monarchy that from an institutional point of view was not, and to an empire consisting of autonomous cities. A new religious language was thus organized around the imperial person on the rhetorical basis of *isotheoi timai*, of honours equal to those made to the gods. This type of amplified tribute, set up from Actium and exploiting the Caesarian heritage (*divus Julius*), founded the institutional architecture of the Principate, giving the Emperor a necessarily prominent position. This policy of reverence framed the power relations in the imperial era and often took the form of cults and rituals intending to raise the emperor to divine equivalence, which however fooled no one. Even when dead, the emperor was consecrated as *divus*, not as *deus*. The emperors were in a way and from an institutional point of view,

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gods without being gods, just as they were monarchs without being monarchs, since the powers shaping the imperial office simply made emperors official representatives of the Republic. This fact which belongs to the rhetoric of power explains the great ambiguity of religious language developed around the imperial figure; it also explains the maintenance of the institution with Constantine and the Christian emperors, who kept the essential meaning of the “imperial cult” based on an admittedly ambiguous ritual arsenal, but adapted to the celebration of the highest honours that shaped the imperial function. Therefore, to find a precise meaning for the varied terms used by Roman people to honour the emperor is just as difficult as solving the necessary ambiguities of political rhetoric.

Political rhetoric often uses linguistic shortcuts and ambiguities, which inevitably give rise to controversies, contradictions and endless debates. The Augustan regime is not an exception: it left us apparently contradictory literary and epigraphic testimonies on the cults delivered to the living emperor, while the Roman religious rules made any deification of the prince unthinkable, especially in the context asserted by the new political power of a restoration of the Republic and its traditional cults. This supposed contradiction of our sources is at the origin of a very abundant modern literature, produced on what the historians baptized as the “imperial cult”.¹ This term is, of course, a reducing concept in the sense that the term often recovers a large number of honours and rites celebrated for the emperor in his role as representative of the Roman Republic and thus of the State.² Another element, which does not hold in light of the documentation, is the strict separation which we make today between politics and religion, while in Roman times, both domains overlapped: in the city state, where the gods lived together with men, any political expression or social ritual necessarily conveyed a religious dimension.³ In this particular case, imperial power could not exist without a specific religious expression or, to put it in another way, the power of the emperor necessarily had a place in public religion.⁴ In Rome, political action is deified and plays a role in structuring the community. But that does not mean that the emperor is a god even after his death, when he becomes not a god, *deus*, but a kind of hero, a *divus*, through an institutional process ordered by the senate.⁵

¹ This term has, of course, been discussed and criticized for a long time. See, for example, Elias Bickerman in *Le culte des Souverains* 1972 and the discussion, p. 26.

² One of the best introductions on the subject is Simon Price’s book, Price 1984b, especially 1-22 and 234–248. Among many other stimulating contributions are Bowersock 1994 and Gordon 2011 (both republished versions of previous articles).

³ Scheid 1985.

⁴ Imperial rituals were a way of conceptualizing the world. See, for example, Price 1984b, 7-8: “I do not see rituals merely as a series of ‘honours’ addressed to the emperor but as a system whose structure defines the position of the emperor.”

⁵ On this distinction, see Price 1984a, 83 and Bowersock 1994, 330. Price notes in particular that from the cult of the deceased Julius Caesar, *divus* referred exclusively in official terminology to former emperors and members of their family. “They were thus,” he adds, “distinguished from the traditional *dei*.” On the process of divinization, see Arce 1988, esp. 127-131.

This ambiguity in our sources is quite obvious in a little story told by Suetonius, who plunges us into the reality of Augustus' reign (*Augustus* 98, 2.5). Shortly before his death in 14 CE, Augustus travels along the coastlines of Campania.⁶ While he goes along the bay of Pozzuoli, the great harbour of the time, the passengers and the sailors of a ship from Alexandria who had just disembarked came to him, said Suetonius, "dressed in white, crowned with flowers and burning some incense, lavishing him with all their wishes of happiness, the most magnificent praises: it is thanks to you, they say, that we live, thanks to you that we can navigate, thanks to you that we enjoy our freedom and our properties."

Apparently, Augustus was so delighted by the honour that he gave forty gold coins to the people accompanying him, making them promise that they would spend the entire sum in the purchase of goods from Alexandria. If we follow Suetonius literally, the Alexandrians greeted Augustus with divine honours, this being indicated by the white clothes, a symbol of purity, floral wreaths and offerings of burning incense, which reflect the usual ceremonies celebrated for the immortal gods. Augustus for his part reacts not as a god, but as a good man and patron, by ordering his men to be pleasant to the Alexandrians.

Divine honours on one side and behaviour of a patron on the other, is that a double language? Certainly not, because the Alexandrians, who were known for their sycophancy and their excesses, chose to pay tribute to Augustus according to Greek tradition, by using *isothēoi timai*, that is equal honours to those celebrating the gods.⁷ Of course, there is no worship here addressed to the living emperor, but distinguished, supreme honours, returned to the one who governed the world and who, by the peace that he instated during his reign, the *Pax Augusta*, made navigation possible and Alexandrian business prosper. Tacitus (*Annales* 6, 18) when talking about the *caelestes honores*, the divine honours given to Theophanes of Mytilene, was not at all shocked, only mentioning that it was simply *graeca adulatio*, a Greek tradition for honouring mortals. We can see the ambiguity of the religious language adopted by the Alexandrians, a language, however, which fooled nobody:⁸ neither Augustus nor the Alexandrians themselves. It has all the subtlety of the honours due to an emperor but it also defines him as a mortal, albeit an exceptional man, an officer of the Roman Republic and a guarantor of its interests. In other words, even if the emperor was from the beginning granted with divine honours, the "imperial cult" has never been comparable to traditional cults. The main evidence, pointed out by Arthur D. Nock and Paul Veyne, is perhaps that there are no ex-voto proofs of fulfilled prayer involving any emperors on their own,

⁶ On the impact of the emperor's travels and the variety of honours and rituals performed during his visits, see Millar 1977, 28-40.

⁷ It did not mean, as pointed by Carter 1982, 203-204, that emperor worship becomes at this point in Suetonius' narrative a real and significant thing. For the "*timai* of the gods", see Price 1984a, 88 and Fishwick *ICLW*, I, 1, 21-31.

⁸ On the ambiguity of language, see Price 1984b, 213: "Language sometimes assimilated the emperor to a god, but ritual held back."

alive or dead.⁹ That is why Nock compared the cult of the emperors to the cult of the Roman standards in the army, arguing that the standards, like the emperor's images, were symbols rather than divine entities.¹⁰ Tertullian (*Apologeticum* 32-33) is not at all afraid to say: "I would not call the emperor a god (*deus*), maybe because I do not know how to lie or because I would not like to laugh at him or because he would not like to be called a god." As noted by Glen Bowersock, this is again simply respectful language.¹¹

Within the context of a religion mixing public cults with the functioning of the civic community, and the functions of the emperor gradually being assimilated with those of the State,¹² it is not difficult to understand that the accumulation of powers in the same person led to a game of one-upmanship and an increase in the number of tributes given to the emperor. In the same way, we can explain the institution of rites and sacrifices centred on the action of the emperor and the gods who accompanied him in the task of restoring the State. After the victory of Actium in 31 BCE, Octavian is installed in the position of his adoptive father Caesar, as head of the Roman world. The honours showered upon Octavian then, in a calculated graduation that literally, year after year and according to the decrees passed by the Senate, shaped the exceptional position of the emperor, made him a ubiquitous figure in public religious events.¹³

Cassius Dio (51, 19-20) gives us an impressive list of honours voted by the people after Actium: triumphs, quadrennial games celebrated for Augustus' health, prayers of thanksgiving decreed for the anniversary of his birth (September 23) and the announcement of his victory at Actium (September 2), tribunician power decreed for life with extended powers, and his association with the people and thus the Roman State in public prayers. A decree was passed which even established a libation in his honour at public and private banquets. The measure broadened the toast to the genius of the master of the house in domestic banquets to the public sphere; was not the emperor after all invested as the *pater patriae*, a title he received later in 2 BCE (Ovid, *Fasti* 2, 127-128)?

In 29 BCE, the senators took another series of actions, giving Octavian the honour to be mentioned on equal terms with the gods in their hymns, an enormous privilege that should of course not be understood as the recognition of parity with the gods. However, in the political language of the time it was a supreme honour, and so worthy of the gods (Cassius Dio 51, 20). Among the honours established

⁹ Mentioned by Bowersock 1994, 172, cf. Nock 1972, 212: "It must be emphasized that no one appears to have said his prayers or did sacrifice to the living Augustus or any other living king in the hope of supernatural blessings"; see also Veyne 2005. This idea and the few and ambiguous exceptions (like *CIL* XIII, 1366) are discussed by Price 1984a, 91-92 and Fishwick 2012, 121-130.

¹⁰ A modern and Christianizing assumption according to Price 1984, 11-12.

¹¹ Bowersock 1994.

¹² Van Andringa 2015.

¹³ It is easy then to understand Tacitus' allusion (*Annales* 1, 10): *Nihil deorum honoribus relictum, cum se templis et effigie numinum per flamines et sacerdotes coli vellet.*

at that time, there is the celebration of public sacrifices to each on his return to Rome, the day of return being considered sacred. There is also the appointment of major public priests, even beyond the normal number allowed for each college, says Dio. Of course, we have to add the privileges conferred in 27 BC, which added to the language of the time another institutional layer to the regime (Cassius Dio 53, 16-17). In January 27, the name Augustus was given to Octavian, a title until then reserved for the gods, without forgetting to mention the honorary shield offered, listing the supreme values of the now state representative, namely military excellence (virtue), justice, mercy to the defeated enemy and *pietas* towards the gods of the Roman State.

Without going into detail, we can speak of a true sanctification or institutionalization (which is the same in antiquity) of the office through the accumulation of honours, which gradually incorporated Augustus, his powers and the highlights of his reign, into a public religion not just completed, but completely renovated for the occasion.¹⁴ For this, Augustus used the institutional and religious language of the Roman Republic. This remark is not without importance, because it challenges the established notion of a cult or even a new religion that would simply be superimposed upon the traditional cults.¹⁵ Indeed, on the one hand, ancestral cults, as has already been noted, were reformulated by introducing a new date for the holidays or a blended liturgy, whereas on the other, divine honours conferred on the emperor were in fact an extraordinary accumulation of worships celebrating the virtues or divine benevolence towards him, much more than a real personal cult of the emperor.

The facts are well known and belong in the restructuration of the monumental centre of Rome, the foundation of an altar to Fortuna Redux at the Porta Capena, the institution of Augustalia in 19 BCE on his return from the East, and the dedication of the altar of Peace in 9 BCE in front of the altar of the Augustan Providence in honour of the adoption of Tiberius by Augustus.¹⁶ Finally, the altar dedicated to the (divine) power of Augustus, his *numen*, in 6 CE definitively sanctified the office.¹⁷

There was nothing shocking in these decisions or in bringing together the emperor and the gods of Rome, even though the accumulation of honours gave a central religious position to the Emperor, something clearly unprecedented in Roman public life. Indeed, in the preserved sources, Augustus always sets his actions in accordance with the traditions, the tradition of Rome, but also with the tradition of the city-states of the Empire as emperor worship was one of the ways

to define the relationship between the new power and the provinces.¹⁸ Augustus intervened each time to determine the admissibility of honours bestowed in Rome and in all the cities of the Roman world. Representing the supreme interests of the Republic, it could not be otherwise. To return to the anecdote told by Suetonius, the absence of exuberant pageantry in the encounter of Augustus with the Alexandrians, manifesting with rites (worthy of a god) the honour of being received by the first of the Romans, is not surprising. Augustus reacted normally in his role of benefactor, of patron of the Roman citizens. This behaviour is, of course, just the opposite of Caligula's actions.¹⁹ Philo (Legatio ad Gaium 164) reports that the bad emperor really thought "he was considered as a god by the Alexandrians, because they were using and abusing the sacred language that men reserved for gods." That again is because religious language was ambiguous, meaning that the "bad emperor" Caligula could present himself as a god. Fundamentally, the excess of honours adapted to the powerful position of the emperor made him worthy of being a god, but of course he was a man because, says Tertullian, if he was not a man he could not be an emperor.²⁰

Like Romulus according to tradition, Augustus left to join the gods only at his death. Again, Augustus did not innovate and could be placed both in the old tradition (Romulus) and the recent one, with the deification of his adoptive father Caesar accompanied by the construction of a temple in 42 BCE.²¹ Augustus was already officially the son of the divinity, he had finally just a step to climb to the divine. He was admitted among the immortals in a ceremony of apotheosis held on the Field of Mars. The funeral borrowed the ceremonial from the ceremonies marking the end of the Republic, giving once again the opportunity to multiply new honours and rituals.²² But this time the honours went to a real member of the divine community. Augustus was declared immortal; he received priesthoods, among them the priesthood of Livia, his wife, and public rituals. A temple was built, like the temple built to the deified Caesar, while a golden portrait was placed in the Temple of Mars. If, however, the deified Augustus was now recognized as an official god of Rome, he joined the minor deities of the Roman Pantheon as shown by the epigraphic records of the Arval Brethren.²³

The Roman Republic being at the head of an empire, it is not surprising that the cults created around the emperor and his power were established simultaneously

¹⁴ Price 1984b; Zanker 1988.

¹⁵ As noted by Simon Price in Beard, North, Price 1998, 206-207.

¹⁶ Zanker 1988.

¹⁷ The date is not certain, see Fishwick *ICLW*, vol. I, 1, 86-87. On the word *numen*, see Varro, *De lingua Latina* 7, 85: *numen dicunt esse imperium*; Festus, p. 172: *numen quasi nutus dei ac potestas*; also Dumézil 1966, 43-44: "le *numen* n'est pas une qualité inhérente à un dieu, mais l'expression d'une volonté particulière de ce dieu."

¹⁸ Mitchell 1993, 103, quoted by Gordon 2011, 42.

¹⁹ On the ambiguous behaviour of Caligula who made himself a god, Suetonius, *Caligula* 22 and Cassius Dio 59, 28, 2-3.

²⁰ On Tertullian and the "imperial cult", see Beaujeu 1972, 131-136 and the discussion, 137-142.

²¹ Weinstock 1971, 385-410.

²² Arce 1988, esp. 38-39.

²³ Scheid 1990, 417-421.

in Rome and in the provinces.²⁴ This is attested by Cassius Dio, who mentions a discussion on the subject between Octavian and the cities of Asia in 29 BCE.²⁵ Religion being an essential element in the language of power, the cults qualifying the imperial actions were also and without surprise seen by provincial communities as an appropriate and effective medium in organizing the relations with the first of the Romans.²⁶ Let us hear Cassius Dio again (51, 20, 8), who sums up the situation²⁷:

Caesar, meanwhile, besides attending to the general business, gave permission for the dedication of shrines in Ephesus and Nicaea to Rome and to Caesar, his father, whom he named the hero Julius. These cities had at that time attained chief place in Asia and in Bithynia respectively. He ordered that the Romans resident in these cities should pay honour to these two divinities; but he permitted the aliens, whom he styled Hellenes, to consecrate shrines to himself, the Asians to have theirs in Pergamum and the Bithynians theirs in Nicomedia. This practice, beginning under him, has been continued under other emperors, not only in the case of the Hellenic nations but also in that of all the others, in so far as they are subject to the Romans. For in the capital itself and in Italy generally no emperor, however worthy of renown he has been, has dare to do this; still, even there various divine honours are bestowed after their death upon such emperors as have ruled uprightly, and, in fact, shrines are built to them.

Clearly, Octavian distinguishes between the originally privileged cities (Ephesus and Nicaea), together with the communities of Roman citizens settled in the Empire, and the 'foreign' cities, that is, incorporated into the Empire but without a Roman status. For the first, the cult making the link with Rome took the form of a combination of two full and complete deities, the goddess Roma and the '*divus*', or deified Caesar.²⁸ The other cities had permission to erect altars and temples dedicated to Augustus in total contradiction with the Roman laws. There is an ambiguity again which, however, can be explained. First, the attitude of Octavian is adapted to diverging situations of power, one related to Roman institutions (colonies and Roman cities, Roman citizens), the other to the barbarian populations or subjects, thus sharing a lower status. Another distinction is that the

24 As pointed out by Millar 1984, 53-55, the sudden outburst of the celebration of Octavian/Augustus was a new phenomenon.

25 Mitchell 1993, 100-107.

26 See Mitchell 1993, 103: "Emperor worship was not a political subterfuge (...) but was one of the ways in which Romans themselves and Provincials alongside them defined their own relationship with a new political phenomenon, an emperor whose power and charisma were so transcendent that he appeared to them as both man and god." Also Price 1984b, 235: "... the emperor was honoured at ancestral religious festivals; he was placed within the gods' sanctuary and temples; sacrifices to the gods invoked their protection for the emperor. There were also festivals, temples and sacrifices in honour of the emperor alone which *were calqued on the traditional honours of the gods*. In other words, the Greek subjects of the Roman empire attempted to relate their ruler to their own dominant symbolic system." (my italics).

27 According to the translation of E. Cary, The Loeb Classical Library.

28 Weinstock 1971, 401-410.

provincials were not at the same level as the Romans of Rome, so they saw the Emperor as further and higher up, which legitimized the different tone adopted by Octavian and which was continued by his successors. Nor am I forgetting that in this case Augustus was not worshiped alone but with the goddess Roma, the two entities forming one single cult, the cult of Roma and Augustus understood as an emanation of the Roman state and not as the associated cults of two gods, Roma and Augustus.

Direct worship of the emperor was, not surprisingly, understood by the Roman elites as a barbarian trait, which explains the wonder of Velleius Paterculus (2, 107) when he described a German leader crossing the River Elbe to touch Tiberius, then designated successor of Augustus, in a religious attitude deemed excessive (and barbaric) by the writer. For the populations submitted or being submitted, as in Germany, representatives of Augustus respected this principle by establishing altars to Augustus with or without the goddess Roma. That is also what happened in Spain with the so-called Sestian altars, after the Governor Sestius, and in Lyon where Drusus, son of Augustus, in 12 BCE dedicated an altar to Rome and Augustus (Livius, *Periochae* 139).²⁹

This provincial feature (also valid in some Italian cities), which we consider ambiguous today, did not give rise to any rejection or astonishment.³⁰ That the emperor was considered a god or godlike, especially outside of Rome, did not fall foul of an ontological truth:³¹ the gods of polytheism simply had nothing to do with the God of the monotheistic religions, defined as a supreme and immaterial entity. This was in contrast to the worship of Augustus, a true incarnation of the Roman state under the most diverse forms and for the salvation of the Empire. The religious reverence of the Alexandrians who met Augustus at Pozzuoli had indeed this purpose: the future of the state now depended not only on the great traditional gods, but also on the emperor "who was at the helm", said Philo. This is indeed one of the great innovations, in religious terms, of the Augustan period.

The persistence of ceremonies in the Christian Empire provides a wonderful confirmation of this ambiguous definition given to the cult. And the very ever-changing nature of the language created by the honours and cults dedicated to the emperor which shaped the relations of power from Augustus finally explains how the so-called imperial cult was able to answer to the new religious situation. Indeed, with and after Constantine, the cult was not only tolerated, but even encouraged, in some way, at least in the communities which kept a strong relationship with imperial power, like Italian cities or new provincial capitals.³² The deceased Constantine was

29 Van Andringa 2002, 33-44.

30 Gradel 2002.

31 Gordon 2011, 42.

32 In fact, new archaeological evidence like the abandonment of civic sanctuaries seems to indicate that public religion was no longer maintained or lacked the same energy in many Western city-states after the third-century crisis, Van Andringa 2014.

even proclaimed *divus*, with the Christian signification that he was received by the god into heaven, like the deified emperors (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 4, 73).³³ The title remained because the term *divus* was not equivalent to *deus* and exclusively attached to imperial power.³⁴ According to Jonathan Bardill, who comments on the coins celebrating the apotheosis,³⁵ “the hand emerging from the clouds might have been interpreted as belonging to any deity, including the Christian God,” even if Eusebius gives, of course, a Christian interpretation of that coin (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 4, 73-74). It seems that the ceremony of divinization was just adapted to the new imperial order where Christians and Pagans were living together.

The famous Hispellum rescript, which seems to be dated between Constantine's death on 22 May, 337 and the joint proclamation of his three sons as *Augusti* on 9 September, goes in the same direction.³⁶ First of all, the rescript is clearly a *political document*. In the Augustan tradition, it forms part of the official dialogue undertaken between a provincial community and Roman imperial power. The main request by the people of Hispellum is to obtain a locally elected priest who could oversee the theatrical and gladiatorial entertainments in the local sanctuary, thus making it unnecessary for them to travel to Volsinii through mountains and forests. Of course, this question was directly related to the *dignitas* conferred to the city of Hispellum. The city of Hispellum asks officially to bear the name of Flavia Constans, the possibility to build a temple to the gens *Flavia* (*in cuius gremio aedem quoque Flavia, hoc est nostrae gentis, ut desideratis, magnifico opera pereici volumus*) and to organize games or public ceremonies (*sollemnitatis editionum*). This follows exactly the normal procedure used in the relationships between the imperial power and the city-states. It is the usual language of power used by Augustus and his successors, but there was a new clause in the dialogue between the emperor and the local community. In his rescript, Constans imposed one condition on the people of Hispellum: their new temple “should not be defiled by the evils of any contagious superstition” (*ne... cuiusquam contagiose superstitionis fraudibus polluantur*). Again, the ambiguity of politics. As noted by many commentators, the condition established by the imperial power is ambiguous and needs to be specified in clear terms, since the word *superstitio* could refer not only to sacrificial rites but to all kinds of practices deemed deviant and celebrated to the pagan gods. This clause may in fact just be political rhetoric, referring to any precise rite performed during the festival. Constans may deliberately have left the wording of his decree open to interpretation, but not because he was resigned to the reality that sacrifice to the members of the family could not be prevented. In fact, Constans was completely aware of how the ruling power was honoured by the performance of traditional rites

³³ Arce, 1988, 159-168.

³⁴ Price 1984a, 83.

³⁵ Bardill 2012, 376-377.

³⁶ Gascou 1967; Bardill 2012, 263-264; Goddard 2002. The date of the rescript is a much discussed issue.

shaped by *isotheoi timai*, but there was a restriction, the *contagiosa superstitio* which referred, probably, to the pagan cults precisely related to the emperor, among them the cults of traditional gods performed *pro salute imperatoris*. He wanted to avoid any risk of physical contact with the pagan gods, in the same way, if we can trust Eusebius (*Vita Constantini* 4, 16), that Constantine prohibited the display of his image in the temples of Constantinople in order to prevent any contagion. The restriction concerned parts of the traditional architecture of the cult and had been to avoid the usual proximity of the emperor with the traditional gods. But the *isotheoi timai*, whatever they were, white clothes, crowns of flowers, incense burning or such like, remained. That is exactly how in the fifth century Philostorgius criticized the Christians of Constantinople for sacrificing to the statue of Constantine and for honouring him with candles and incense *hos theoi*, like to a god³⁷ (Philostorgius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2, 17). As confirmed by a law of 425 (*Codex Theodosianus* 15, 4, 1), there was nothing shocking in honouring the rulers using the traditional pagan way. The statues were considered *ornamenta* and a clear distinction was made between the *numen* of God and the human *dignitas* of the emperors.³⁸ Of course, we do not know what exactly the people of Hispellum did to respect the imperial statement, and they might have sacrificed to the gods elsewhere.³⁹ In fact, nothing indicates that the sacrifices were forbidden, it was just a matter of respecting the public position of the emperor and establishing at the same time a certain distance with the traditional gods.

I would not say then that the cult was secularized; quite the contrary, it kept the same ritual expressions. In fact, as Glen Bowersock has pointed out, it was certainly altered or even better reshaped without affecting the grandeur of the office or the State.⁴⁰ Official honours easily replaced the pagan cult, first because the ambiguity of religious language and the subtle gradation of *isotheoi timai* made this perfectly possible, and second because the distance between a cult and a supreme honour was simply very short. Tertullian (*Apologeticum* 32), more than a century before, recognized these nuances, having no objections to an oath *pro imperatoribus*, for the emperors, which he says was equivalent to an oath for the prosperity of the empire and Roman power. But of course, he objected to oaths sworn to the genius of an emperor. It was unthinkable for a Christian to pray to a pagan god, but not to an emperor, because everybody was conscious that the emperor was not a god and that honours conferred on emperors were first of all defined as *isotheoi timai*,

³⁷ Philostorge, *Histoire ecclésiastique*, texte critique de J. Bidez et traduction de E. Des Places, Les éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2013: Livre II, 17.

³⁸ *Si quando nostrae statuae vel imagines eriguntur seu diebus, ut adsolet, festis sive communibus, adsit iudex sine adorationis ambitioso fastigio, ut ornamentum diei vel loco et nostrae recordationi sui probet accessisse praesentiam. Ludis quoque simulacra proposita tantum in animis concurrentium mentisque secretis nostrum numen et laudes vigere demonstrent; excedens cultura hominum dignitatem superno numini reservetur.* On this text, see Goddard 2002, 1048-1049.

³⁹ For a similar strategy, see Libanios, *Oratio* 30, 17.

⁴⁰ Bowersock 1994.

honours worthy of a god or supreme honours. Thus, the transformation of the cult under Constantine means not the elimination of sacrifice, but the elimination of the associations between the pagan gods and the emperor. Reforming the language of honours and keeping part of the ceremonial, it was then possible to maintain the sense of the imperial cult and the ritual of power.

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