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The Misunderstood Emperor? Valens as a Persecuting Ruler in Late Antique Literature

Maijastina Kahlos

Introduction

The persecutions of Christians by the emperors Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian left a prominent mark on the Christian communities in Late Antiquity. Their symbolic value was so significant to the self-presentation of fourth-century Christians that any allusion to persecutions in inner-Christian disputes could undermine the integrity of an opponent or, in the case of emperors, their position as fair-minded rulers.[1] Consequently, the accusation of persecution became an efficient rhetorical weapon in the fourth-century relations between the emperor and the ecclesiastical leaders. Fourth-century emperors were at risk of being labelled as persecutors when they intervened in the disputes between Christian sects, such as the long-drawn-out doctrinal controversy between Nicenes and Homoians.[2] An emperor could also be slandered as a persecutor if he did not represent himself effectively enough as a champion against 'pagans', 'heretics', or Jews.

This article discusses the image of a persecuting ruler, Emperor Valens (r. 364–378), whom Nicene bishops and church historians depicted as a heretical persecutor of true Christians. This image has prevailed long even in the modern accounts of Valens' reign. In recent decades, however, R. Malcolm Errington, Noel Lenski, Hartmut Leppin, and Susanna Elm have looked closer into this image and viewed the policies of Valens in a more nuanced light.[3] Along these lines, my intention is neither to condemn nor rehabilitate or praise Emperor Valens. Instead, I analyze how ecclesiastical writers in different positions portrayed him, aiming at reaching a balanced understanding of these representations with the background of imperial religious policies and ecclesiastical disputes. Valens may have supported the Homoian communities simply because they were dominant in the East as he became the emperor; it is possible that he aimed to maintain the status quo for the practical reasons and was not involved in doctrinal issues himself. The arsenal that Valens used were confiscations and banishments, the means that his predecessors, pagan and Christian alike, had used. For Nicene churches and bishops, these procedures were persecution, and consequently, Valens' coercive measures were compared with the previous persecutions by pagan emperors. The label of a persecutor was an effective polemical device as it could targeted

[1] For the persecutions of Christians and their influence, see Clark (2004), 38–59; Rives (1999), 135–54; DePalma Digeser (2006), 68–84.

[2] I use the terms Nicene and Homoian instead of 'orthodox', 'catholic', or 'Arian'. None of these terms is unproblematic, as the terms 'Homoian' and 'Nicene' imply homogenous groups; furthermore, the 'Nicene' tends to presuppose an original Nicene theology; Ayres (2004), 236–9.

[3] Errington (2006), 188–9, states that labels such as 'Nicene' and 'Arian' do not fit Valens, who above all seems to have been interested in retaining social tranquility in his part of the Empire; Lenski (2002), 213, states that Valens "was not, however, nearly as wicked as some sources would have us believe;" Leppin (1996), 91–104; Elm (2012), 472–4.

against heterodox emperors, magistrates, and ecclesiastical rivals. In the case of Valens, the label of a persecutor has stuck in the ancient and modern historiography for centuries.

In the Shadow of his Brother

It has fallen to Valens' lot to be constantly compared with his co-ruler and brother Valentinian I (r. 364–375). Valentinian attained the throne after the death of Jovian (February 17, 364) and he summoned his brother to share the government with him and take responsibility for the Eastern part of the Empire. Valentinian was renowned for his broadminded religious policies. In his appeal for the altar of Victory, Symmachus mentions the emperor as the exemplar of religious toleration.[4] Even Ammianus Marcellinus – who otherwise depicts Valentinian as a paranoid ruler, especially with obsessed fear of magic – writes in a positive tone about his religious moderation.[5] According to Ammianus, the emperor remained neutral regarding the differences of religions: he neither harassed anyone nor ordered anyone to worship this or that divinity. Valentinian did not try to bend the necks of his subjects with intimidating edicts in favor of his own religion but rather let religious issues be as he found them.[6] Valentinian and Valens are known at the beginning of their reign to have proclaimed a decree in which they granted everyone the freedom to embrace any form of worship they wished.[7]

Valentinian seems to have deliberately distanced himself from the doctrinal controversies, possibly following the policies started by his predecessor Jovian – in the interest of maintaining social peace.[8] Sozomen reports that Valentinian commented on bishops lobbying their doctrinal views with the words: "I am but one of the laity, and have therefore no right to interfere in these transactions; let the priests, to whom such matters appertain, assemble where they please."[9]

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[4] Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.19. *Prefect and Emperor*. *The* Relationes *of Symmachus*, trans. R.H. Barrow (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

[5] Ammianus writes extensively about the magic trials in the 370s, commissioned both by Valentinian in the west and Valens in the east: Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 26.4.4; 28.1.8; 28.1.50; 29.1.41; 29.2.3-4; 30.5.11. den Boeft, Drijvers, den Hengst, and Teitler (2013), 76–9; den Boeft, Drijvers, den Hengst, and Teitler (2015), 124; Humphries (1999), 117–26. For magic trials during the reigns of Valentinian and Valens, see Lizzi (2004), 209–35; Matthews (1989), 210–25; Funke (1967), 165–75; Lenski (2002), 105–6, 211–13.

[6] Amm. 30.9.5. See den Boeft, Drijvers, den Hengst, and Teitler (2015), 191–3 and Hunt (2007), 71–94.

[7] The decree is no longer extant but Valentinian I and Valens refer to it in another law (in 371): *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.9. *Theodosiani libri XVI cum constitutionibus Sirmondianis* I.1, eds. Theodor Mommsen and Paul Krüger (Berlin: Weidmann, 1905).

[8] Jovian's moderate religious policies are attested by Themistius (*Oratio* 5) and Socrates (*Historia ecclesiastica* 3.25; *SC* 493, 352–9). On Themistius' speech and Jovian's religious policy, see Heather and Moncur (2001), 34–5, 157–8; Vanderspoel (1995), 148–53; Kahlos (2011), 287–304.

[9] Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.7.2 (*SC* 495, 278). Theodoret (*Historia ecclesiastica* 4.7; *SC* 530, 200–5) depicts Valentinian as permissive to the election of the Nicene Ambrose as the bishop of Milan. Modern scholars have surmised whether Valentinian was Nicene or Homoian Christian. Late antique sources represent him as a Nicene, probably because he did not favor Homoians. E.g. Socr. *Eccl.* 4.1.12; 4.29.1 (*SC* 505, 24; 124); Sozom. *Eccl.* 6.6.10; 6.21.7 (*SC* 495, 276; 344). However, Valentinian's restraint from backing any particular version of Christianity does not prove him to being Nicene or Homoian. Lenski (2002), 240–1 proposes that Valentinian probably changed his initial Homoian leanings to conform to the Nicene norms prevalent in the west.

Furthermore, in the disagreement between the Nicene Hilary of Poitiers and the Homoian Auxentius of Milan in 364, Emperor Valentinian seems to have been uninterested in their doctrinal dispute and rather more concerned about maintaining the social tranquility in Milan.[10] Valentinian was probably able to maintain an indifferent stance in Christian disputes as he was not burdened with the inner-Christian power struggles in the west to the same extent as Valens was in the East. Even though in the west, especially in Illyricum and Italy, Nicene and Homoian bishops engaged in an intense struggle for recognition of their views, these conflicts were never as frequent nor as fervent as in the east.[11] Unlike his brother, Valens intervened in ecclesiastical matters and was thus intrinsically involved in the doctrinal controversies. At least this is how late antique sources tend to represent him: for example, the church historian Socrates who contrasts the moderate Valentinian with Valens, the tyrannical oppressor of true (that is, Nicene) Christians.[12] For the ecclesiastical writers, doctrinal issues were the main concern and consequently, they interpreted the policies of Valens along sectarian lines.

Valens and Traditional Imperial Policies

From the perspective of the imperial government, the internal disagreements within the church threatened the much-craved unity in the Empire. Accordingly, imperial religious policies and acts of discipline such as the banishments of bishops were mostly dictated by the need to maintain civic peace. As Valens became the ruler of the eastern half of the Empire, the Homoian Christians were the dominant groups there, and Valens was trying to preserve the status quo. Therefore, instead of seeing Valens as taking a deliberate position specifically against Nicene Christians, we could interpret his policy, for instance, in exiling Nicene bishops, as a continuation of the age-old Roman tradition of keeping order in the cities by banishing troublemakers. Legal precedents and examples found in the centuries-old tradition set guidelines and justifications for imperial procedures with problematic bishops and monks. In the early imperial period, adherents of Isis and Bacchus, Jews, Christians, philosophers, astrologers and soothsayers had been periodically banished from the city of Rome.[13] In the Christianising Empire, Constantine set the punishment of exile as the way to deal with ecclesiastical rivalries and settle disputes and his example was followed by his successors, especially Constantius II. This exposed Christian emperors to being charged of persecution: Constantine was blamed for being the persecutor of the 'Donatists' and Constantius was attacked in the polemics by Hilary of Poitiers, Lucifer of Cagliari, and Athanasius.[14]

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[10] Hilary travelled to Milan in order to arouse Valentinian against Auxentius with the accusation of 'Arianism'; Valentinian responded by ordering a trial in which Auxentius won the case. Eventually Hilary was banned from Milan as a troublemaker and he wrote *Contra Auxentium* (*PL* 10, 606–18) as his apology. On the dispute, see Heil (2014), 100.

[11] For the differences, see Errington (2006), 188–9; Lenski (2002), 234.

[12] Socr. *Eccl.* 4.1 (*SC* 505, 22–7).

[13] Garnsey and Humfress (2001), 143–4; Washburn (2013), 43–6.

[14] For the banishment of bishops, see Fournier (2016), 47–65; Barry (2016), 251–62; Hillner (2016), 11–43; Washburn (2013), 48–64.

Likewise, Valens tried to calm the mutual conflicts of Christian sects, and banishing rabblerousing bishops was one of the methods in the imperial arsenal. In 365, he is known to have ordered that "bishops who had been deposed and expelled from their churches under Constantius but who had reclaimed and retaken their bishoprics in the time of Julian's reign should once again be expelled from their churches."[15] Errington perceives the aim of Valens' policy as "not doctrinal persecution but disciplined tolerance."[16] Nonetheless, from the viewpoint of the clerics whose life was troubled or even ruined in these exiles, Valens' disciplinary policies were understandably at risk of being seen as persecution, as we will see in the discussion below. As mentioned, Valens' challenges in the east may have been more demanding than those in the west; it is also possible that he was not particularly skillful in his methods of maintaining "disciplined tolerance." He was ready to use the army to ensure order and tranquility – but that was nothing exceptional in the Roman Empire. Theodoret of Cyrrhus reports to us how Valens sent imperial troops to calm down Alexandria and support the ordination of the Homoian bishop Lucius after the death of the Nicene Athanasius.[17]

Valens did not, however, resort to coercion on every occasion. Even Nicene ecclesiastical writers had to admit that the emperor ended up in a sort of stalemate with Nicene bishops, and let them keep their bishoprics in many regions for longer periods. The most notorious case was Basil of Caesarea (whom I will discuss below) but Nicenes in Alexandria and Antioch also were left in peace from time to time. It seems that after having finally put an end to the years of civil war during the revolt of Procopius, Valens considered his imperial position as being secure enough – even on the ecclesiastical stage. After 366, Valens did not intervene in the affairs of Athanasius in Alexandria. In Antioch, Valens probably did not regard the Nicenes as being conspicuous and consequently saw them as not being dangerous enough to be concerned about them.[18] Furthermore, we have a number of cases in which the emperor is depicted as losing his temper, ordering banishment but later on cancelling his own commands. In 368 while leading warfare against the Goths, Valens visited Tomi and met the local Nicene bishop Vetranio. After having argued with the emperor on doctrinal issues in a church at Tomi, Vetranio abandoned Valens and walked out, going to another church with his parishioners following him. Valens was enraged and ordered the bishop to be exiled. Later, as Sozomen interprets the incident, Valens began to think about disturbances that the local bishop's banishment would cause and called him back.[19] Valens is also known to have banished Novatian Christians from Constantinople and later let them return.[20] Furthermore, Jerome and Rufinus mention that Valens made a recall of Nicene exiles on the eve

[15] *Historia acephala* 5.1 (*SC* 317, 158-161). Trans. Lenski (2002), 246–7.
[16] Errington (2006), 175–7, 188–90.
[17] Theod. *Eccl.* 4.22.13–15 (*SC* 530, 276–9). Lenski (2002), 243.
[18] *Hist. aceph.* 5.8–10 (*SC* 317, 162–5); see also Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 11.2 (*PL* 21, 510); Socr. *Eccl*. 4.13.6; 4.20.1 (*SC* 505, 64–5; 76–7) and Sozom. *Eccl.* 6.12.16 (*SC* 495, 302–5).
[19] Sozom. *Eccl*. 6.21.3–6 (*SC* 495, 342–4). Sozomen adds that the region (Scythia) was important in the defense of the Empire.
[20] Socr. *Eccl*. 4.9.1–7 (*SC* 505, 44–5); Sozom. *Eccl.* 6.9 (*SC* 495, 288–90).

of the Gothic war in 378. This recall may have been due to the threat of the Gothic conflict or the pressures of popular disapproval of Valens' policies.[21]

Tyrants and Persecutors

As Michael Gaddis points out, the ancient discussions lacked modern concepts such as 'human rights'; instead, writers argued about the conduct and action of those in power. Emperors were expected to act with a certain code of civil kindness (*civilitas, clementia, philanthropia*). Even though the emperor was a monarch with absolute power and the air of divinity, he was still supposed to rule with consideration and take into account the imagined consensus of his subjects.[22] A few writers, such as non-Christian Themistius and Symmachus, asserted that the role of the ruler was to balance between different interest groups in the inter-religious and inter-sectarian disputes. Both Themistius and Symmachus advised emperors to take a middle position between religions, notwithstanding the one which was the object of their own religious adherence.[23] In 364, Themistius praised Valens in a speech (*Oratio* 6) for his gentleness (*philanthropia*) and exalted the imperial brothers for their mutual brotherly love, to which he also connects the common brotherhood of humankind and an appeals to the unity of religions and thus religious moderation: all humans are the creation of God the Father and they all pursue towards their Father who is one and the same.[24] Themistius is also known to have asked Valens for religious tolerance in another speech (in 375/376) which is no longer extant but which the church historian Socrates sums up. Themistius spoke up for the Nicene Christians and appealed to the incomprehensibility of the supreme deity; religious variances were inevitable because God desired humans to have a diversity of opinions (*diaphorôs doxazesthai*) about him. According to Socrates, the emperor's severity was to some extent alleviated.[25] In addition to the mediator position, an emperor was expected to resist his anger and other impulses. Ammianus, when criticizing Valens' irascible character and his overreaction, especially in commissioning the extensive magic trials in Antioch the 370s, condenses the anticipations set on an upright emperor: "it is the duty of a good ruler to restrain his power, to resist unbounded desire and implacable anger."[26]

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[21] Jerome, *Chronicon* s.a. 378 (*GCS* 47, 249); Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 11.13 (*PL* 21, col. 522C). On the historicity of Valens' recall, see Snee (1985): 395–419.

[22] Gaddis (2005), 17–18; Brown (1992), 8–9, 55–7; Lenski (2002), 211–12.

[23] Themistius' *Oration* 5, addressed to Emperor Jovian in early 364, praised the emperor for his policy of religious moderation. Themistius (*Or.* 5.67d-69c) contrasted Jovian's tolerant attitude with the preceding emperors who were not named; allusions were probably targeted at Constantius II and Julian, who in their policies turned against 'pagans' and Christians respectively. Heather and Moncur (2001), 34–5, 157–8; Kahlos (2011), 288–96.

[24] Them. *Or*. 6.77a-78a. Themistius nominally addressed his speech to both emperors even though he delivered in Constantinople in the presence of Valens only. In their speeches to rulers, Greek and Roman rhetoricians routinely referred to *clementia* and *philanthropia* as the principal virtues of good rulers. For Themistius' or. 6, see Heather and Moncur (2001), 148, 178, 188–9; Vanderspoel (1995), 157–61.

[25] Socr. *Eccl*. 4.32.1–5 (*SC* 505, 132–5); see also Sozom. *Eccl*. 6.36.6–6.37.1 (*SC* 495, 442–5). Themistius used similar arguments as in his oration 5 to Jovian. Vanderspoel (1995), 24, 178–9; Kahlos (2009), 82–7.

[26] Amm. 29.2.18; trans. John C. Rolfe (*LCL* 331, 224–27). See Boeft, Jan den, Jan Willem Drijvers, Daniël den Hengst, and Hans Teitler (2013), 100–2. Both Valens and Valentinian I organized intensively trials against alleged practitioners of magic. Wiebe (1995), 149–54 understood the magic trials as persecutions of 'pagans.' The procedures

No emperor wanted to be labelled as a tyrant or a persecutor of Christians. Valens nonetheless received this label. Gregory of Nazianzus calls him not only "the emperor fighting against Christ" (*christomachos basileus*), but also "the tyrant of faith" (*tês pisteôs turannos*). He describes Valens' attire and policies in the manner conventional of Greco-Roman depictions of ancient tyrants, comparing him to Xerxes, the King of Persia, who attacked Greece during the Persian wars. Both are characterized as acting with wrath and pride. Gregory flavors the imagery of tyranny with the famous Psalm reference about the ungodly: Valens "stretched forth his mouth unto heaven, speaking blasphemy against the most High, and his tongue went through the world". Gregory lists Valens' acts of persecution from exiles and confiscations to open and secret plotting. He used "persuasion where there was opportunity, and violence where persuasion was not possible." Theodoret compared Valens with "the foolish Herod" as they both clung unto an oath and therefore could not withdraw from their decisions. History provided plenty of comparative material for the Nicene polemics against Homoian emperors: Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, and Lucifer of Cagliari in their attacks against Constantius II paralleled the emperor with the Egyptian Pharaoh in Exodus, Emperor Maxentius, Emperor Nero, Pontius Pilate, Cain, Saul, and Ahab.[27]

The Topos of a Misled Ruler

In ancient literature, a ruler could be depicted as having been misled by either his malevolent councilors or power-hungry women.[28] In the case of Christian emperors, depraved bishops turn a ruler's head in crooked directions, especially into heresy. Subsequently, Nicene ecclesiastical writers portrayed Valens as having been misled by Homoian bishops, such as Eudoxius of Constantinople and Euzoius of Antioch.[29]

Sozomen describes the imperial brothers as differing in creed (*doxa*) and temper (*tropos*), even though they were both Christians, and then states that Valens was baptized with Eudoxius as his initiator (*mystagôgos*). This is set as a context for Valens, who is then depicted as being "zealously attached to the doctrines of Arius" and eager to force "everyone to believe in the same way as he

aimed against magic were used against Christians and 'pagans' alike. It is more appropriate to interpret the magic trials as targeting political opponents and possible rivals for the imperial throne. For balanced accounts, see Errington (2006), 119; Lenski (2002), 107–11, 213–14; Rohmann (2016), 64–9.

[27] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43.44–6 (*SC* 384, 218–25). Reference is to Psalm 72:9. Theod. *Eccl*. 4.19.10 (*SC* 530, 254). For the rhetorical image of the tyrant, see Gaddis (2005), 17–18 and Flower (2013), 82–94. For the imagery of tyranny in the attacks against Constantius, see Flower (2013), 110–13. In Hilary's polemic (*In Constantium* 7, *SC* 334, 180), Constantius is a tyrant, "not only in human matters but also in divine ones."

[28] Wicked advisors frequent ancient literature from Herodotus (the Persian ruler Xerxes deluded by his councilors) and Polybius (Hellenistic rulers deceived by his courtiers) onwards. In Roman literature, bad emperors are depicted as being under the influence of persons who elite writers regarded as unworthy such as women, actors, and freedmen. Leppin (1996), 96; Flower (2013), 103.

[29] On the influence of Euzoius on Valens: Socr. *Eccl*. 4.21.1–4; Sozom. *Eccl*. 6.19.2; Theod. *Eccl*. 4.21.3; 4.22.10; o the influence of Eudoxius: Socr. *Eccl*. 4.1.6; Sozom. *Eccl*. 6.6.10; Theod. *Eccl*. 4.12.1; Orosius, *Historia adversus paganos* 7.32.6 (Orose, *Histoires, Contre les Païens* vol. 3, ed. M.–P. Arnaud-Lindet, Paris: Belles Lettres, 1991), 85.

did".[30] Furthermore, according to Socrates and Sozomen, it was Eudoxius who misguided the emperor in cancelling church councils and forbidding bishops to hold their meetings.[31] Sozomen states that Valens and Eudoxius "did not stop harassing Christians who had beliefs different from theirs."[32]

Epiphanius of Salamis, writing during Valens' lifetime, is moderate in his criticism of the emperor himself, but the Homoian bishops around him receive the harshest disparagement, especially Eudoxius. In the manner typical of Epiphanius, these are depicted as a "gang of snakes". This gang "gained further strength through Eudoxius, who wormed his way into the confidence of the most pious and God-living emperor Valens**,** and once again corrupted his ear."[33] After Valens' death, Gregory of Nazianzus states that the emperor was "debased by those who led him."[34]

While it is completely credible for an emperor to be guided by his courtiers, administrators, and bishops, the influence of councilors and clerics is often stereotyped in ecclesiastical sources. Even more wicked than the insidious bishops, was the woman behind the emperor's actions. The female influence is a recurring topos in Greco-Roman literature, especially invectives that aim to portray an opponent in a doubtful light. Even the suspicion of being under control of women (or other people such as eunuchs whose masculinity was doubtful) could undermine the credibility of a ruler.[35] Theodoret claims that Valens was originally a Nicene Christian but that his wife Domnica deluded him and drew him away from the apostolic doctrine. According to Theodoret, Valens decided to receive baptism because he was going to campaign against the Goths in Thrace and did not wish to go to battle without the protection of baptism. As such, this decision was commendable but Valens turned out to be weak, as he let himself be led astray from the truth. The empress Domnica is given a role comparable to the primordial temptress as Theodoret parallels Valens with Adam. 'Our first the father' Adam was seduced by his spouse and was subdued and enslaved. Theodoret uses the term *katathelchtheis*, which means 'subdued by spells', and continues to stress

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[30] Sozom. *Eccl.* 6.6.10 (*SC* 495, 276). Here Valentinian is set in contrast to Valens: Valentinian embraced the Nicene view but did not harass "those who believed in a different way." On the baptism by Eudoxius as the *mystogogos*, see also Theod. *Eccl.* 4.12.4 (*SC* 530, 228).

[31] Cancelling the council of Homoiousians in Lampsacus: Sozom. *Eccl.* 6.7.9 (*SC* 495, 282); forbidding Nicenes to assemble in Tarsus in 366: Socr. *Eccl.* 4.12.40; Sozom. *Eccl*. 6.12.5.

[32] Sozom. *Eccl.* 6.10.2-3 (*SC* 495, 292); see also Socr. *Eccl.* 4.13.3–4.

[33] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 69.13.1. Trans. Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Books II and III, De Fide* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 342. Cf. Socr. *Eccl.* 4.1.6; Sozom. *Eccl.* 4.6.10; Theod. *Eccl.* 4.12.4.

[34] Greg. Naz. *Or*. 43.30 (*SC* 384, 192–6); see also 43.31 on "the evil rulers of the churches" and "the bitter governors of his world-wide Empire" who joined into Valens' attack against true Christians; also 43.54 on "the wicked" around the emperor; "our haters." Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 1.140 (*SC* 521, 214), refers to "one of the adversaries of God from Illyricum" who led Valens' assaults against the Nicenes.

[35] Cooper (1992): 150–64. As Flower, *Emperors and Bishops*, 103–4, describes, an emperor "became emasculated by his subservience to people who were themselves not wholly 'masculine'." For example, Libanius (*Oratio* 30.46; *LCL* 452, 142) uses the topos of womanly influence to attack the unnamed official who is described as obedient to his wife's whims who in her turn is subservient to the monks. The official is usually identified as the *PPO* 384-385 Cynegius Maternus. McLynn (2005), 113. Athanasius *Historia Arianorum* 38.5; 6.2) maintained that Constantius was under the control of imperial women and eunuchs; likewise, Ammianus (14.11.2–4; 21.16.16) portrayed Constantius as being under control of not only "fickle flatterers" but also his "wives and the shrill voices of eunuchs."

Valens' humiliation, explaining that he was not taken captive in war but became "obedient to female wily words".[36]

Basil of Caesarea and Valens

The affairs between the Nicene clergy and the ruler were more complex than open coercion. As mentioned above, Valens did not interfere in all ecclesiastical affairs; Rufinus, Socrates and Sozomen had to admit that, after 366, he let Athanasius maintain his position in Alexandria, and they explained Valens' non-interventionist policy as caused by fear of causing disturbances in Alexandria.[37]

Similar complexities can be perceived in the relations between Valens and Basil of Caesarea. Valens met Basil in 370 in Cappadocia and again in 371/372 in Caesarea in Cappadocia. They ended up in a form of peaceful coexistence, at least temporarily – probably because Basil had a powerful position in his region. Basil's case shows that Valens was capable of remaining moderate and even impartial, at least in some ecclesiastical disputes, in Asia Minor. Basil was an influential regional patron whom the imperial government used, for example, in settling Roman relations with Armenia, and Valens made considerable donations of imperial estates to Basil's church for charity. Mutual interests led the doctrinal antagonists to exchange favors, as Raymond Van Dam describes it, "emperor and bishop were now prepared to work together on fiscal and military concerns".[38] The standstill between Basil and Valens provoked criticism from Basil's opponents, and therefore, in *Against Eunomius*, Gregory of Nyssa defends Basil's fortitude against the Eunomian charges of cowardice and compliance.[39] A similar apologetic bent is visible in the *Encomium of Basil* written by Gregory of Nazianzus after Basil's death. In his description of the encounter of the bishop and the emperor during the Festival of Epiphany in 371, Gregory portrays Basil as upright and fearless while Valens is clumsy and anxious. Stripped of the encomiastic decoration, the narrative is simply this: the emperor attends the festivities and brings gifts to the altar; there he stumbles and is about to fall down. In Gregory's interpretation, Valens is so anxious that he staggers and totters. Now, Basil meets Valens in the sanctuary and they have a discussion. Even though Gregory diminishes the meeting as a "quasi-communion with us," he admits that this meeting secured "the emperor's

[36] Theod. *Eccl.* 4.12.1–4 (*SC* 530, 228). Domnica had first been ensnared and now they were entrapped together in the great deceit of Arianism, Theodoret explains and mentions Eudoxius as their instigator. On Theodoret's claim (also 4.6.3; 4.7.10) that Valens was originally Nicene Christian – generally questioned in modern scholarship, see Bouffartique, Martin, Pietri, and Thelamon (2009), 198–9, 205–6; Lenski (2002), 241–3; Leppin (1996), 96–7.
[37] Sozomen (*Eccl.* 6.12.13–16; *SC* 495, 306–8) writes that Valens let Athanasius return to his see, but only because of "the esteem that Athanasius universally had". Valens was afraid of irritating his brother Valentinian I, "well-known to be attached to the Nicene doctrines" or was just concerned of exciting Athanasius' adherents into riots; Rufin. *Eccl.* 11.2 (*PL* 21, 510); Socr. *Eccl.* 4.13.6; 4.20.1; *Hist. aceph.* 5.8–10 (*SC* 317, 162–5).
[38] For complexities between Basil and Valens, see Van Dam (2002), 51, 106–9, 115–19; Rousseau (1994), 281–90; Parvis (2014), 74; Lenski (2002), 253–4. The donation: Theod. *Eccl.* 4.19.13 (*SC* 530, 256).
[39] Greg. Nyss. *Eun.* 1.132 (*SC* 521, 208–11).

kindly feeling (*philanthropia*) towards us" and prevented for the most part "the persecution which assailed us like a river."[40]

Gregory of Nazianzus also tells us about how Basil was almost banished. There is a defensive tone here as well since Gregory needs to explain how Basil was not punished with exile as many other bishops. The decree for his banishment had already been signed and everything was arranged for his deportation, but this "was undone by God." The fever of Valens' son put an end to the emperor's arrogance, since he unsuccessfully sought help everywhere, only turning to Basil in the end. Gregory stresses that Basil came to help "without delay or reluctance" and the son's illness immediately relaxed. If Valens had only summoned Basil and not trusted any heterodox – not blended salt water with the fresh water – the son would have survived.[41]

The ecclesiastical historians Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret describe the same incident later. Their accounts of the encounters between Valens and Basil are varying but the main thread is that the emperor wanted to order Basil into exile but eventually gave up his plans. In all three narratives, Basil boldly refuses Valens' demands or those of his praetorian prefect Modestus to embrace the Homoian creed and is ready to be banished. The bishop announces his intention not to change his doctrinal views with words: "I am the same today that I shall be tomorrow." Then Valens' son Galates falls ill and Valens asks Basil to pray for the son.[42] In these accounts, Valens, his wife Domnica and everyone else realize that the son's disease is a divine punishment. Basil promises that Valens' son will recover if he receives baptism from the Nicenes. However, Valens' son receives baptism from the Homoians and dies. Valens is depicted as repenting and therefore, Basil is allowed to stay in his bishopric. The emperor, however, is continuously misled by his councilors and thus Basil is harassed again but still evades exile. [43] Theodoret tells us an anecdote in which the emperor tries to sign his order but cannot write even one word because one pen after another breaks and his hand quivers, and finally he becomes so frightened that he tears up the decree with his hands.[44]

What is common in these accounts is that they resemble the narratives of earlier martyrdoms during the persecutions by Decius, Valerian and Diocletian, with fanciful novelistic features such as divine punishment, illness, promises, and repentance.[45] These accounts reveal intricacies in the relations between the emperor and the bishop. Basil has the spiritual advantage over Valens

[40] Greg. Naz. *Or*. 43.51–3 (SC 384, 232–7).
[41] Greg. Naz. *Or*. 43.54 (*SC* 384, 236–41). Gregory compares God's intervention with the sickness of Valens' son to the illness of the Egyptian first-born sons in Exodus 12:29.
[42] In these accounts, Valens and Basil meet either in Antioch or Cappadocian Caesarea. Socr. *Eccl*. 4.26.16–24 (*SC* 505, 112–14): Antioch; Sozom. *Eccl*. 6.16.1–10 (*SC* 495, 316–22): Cappadocia; Theod. *Eccl.* 4.19.8–16 (*SC* 530, 250–60): Cappadocia; Rufin. *Eccl*. 11.9 (*PL* 21, 519–20): the prefect's court.
[43] Socr. *Eccl*. 4.26.21 (*SC* 505, 114); Theod. *Eccl*. 4.19.8–16 (*SC* 530, 250–60); Sozom. *Eccl.* 6.16.2 (*SC* 495, 318); see also Rufin. *Eccl.* 11.9 (*PL* 21, 519).
[44] Theod. *Eccl.* 4.19.15 (*SC* 530, 258).
[45] Teitler (2017), 42, 74–6 on the characteristics of the mainly non-historical tales of martyrdom, called "passions épiques" in the groundbreaking research of Hippolyte Delehaye in the early 1900s.

irrespective of the doctrinal stance he represents, and the emperor recognizes this superiority. Basil is brought to the tribunal, questioned, and encounters his calumniators boldly. Valens is humiliated while Basil's spiritual superiority and boldness in speech, *parrhesia*, is celebrated.[46] *Parrhesia*, freedom of speech in front of the ruler usually belongs to the ancient narratives of philosophers. In the accounts and self-accounts of Nicene writers, *parrhesia* likewise becomes a tool of promotion and self-promotion of integrity under a tyrant.[47] Basil's position was ambiguous as he had not been exiled, and therefore, both Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus had to defend him and depict his upright stance in the face of the emperor. This portrayal was adopted in the later church histories.

New Julian and Friend of Pagans

Several Christian writers such as Ambrose of Milan demanded that emperors support what they regarded as the true religion and the true version of Christianity. Christian emperors should not allow religious dissent. An emperor's moderate attitude to religious dissenters could be twisted into negligence or laxity. If the emperor showed too much forbearance towards non-Christians, Jews, or heterodox Christians, he could be labelled as a 'pagan', 'paganizing', a Jew, 'Judaizing', an apostate, or a 'heretic' himself.[48] Theodoret paints Valens as a friend of pagans: Valens gave "complete license" to everyone – "those under cover of Christian name, pagans, Jews, and the rest" – to worship in any manner they wished. The only exception were the Nicenes: thus, the emperor was "a foe to none but them who held the apostolic doctrine", driving them from their churches. As a consequence, as Theodoret states, pagan and Jewish practices flourished in Antioch under Valens' reign. Moreover, all this was public: "The rites of Jews, of Dionysus, and of Demeter were now no longer performed in a corner, as they would be in a pious reign, but by revelers running wild in the forum." Valens' befriending of pagans is contrasted with Theodosius I who makes an end to all this wickedness.[49]

Fourth-century emperors were constantly at risk of being branded either as persecuting (true) Christians or falling themselves into 'paganism'. Sozomen claimed that under Valens' reign, the persecution that the bishops faced was equal to the persecutions inflicted by 'pagans'.[50] Julian's anti-Christian stance was also remembered in the polemic against Valens.[51] For Gregory of Nazianzus, Valens was a new Julian and a fake Christian.[52] In his *Encomium of Basil*, Gregory exclaimed that Valens was "a persecutor in succession to the persecutor" and "in succession to the apostate". Even though he was not an apostate, he was still no better to the true Christians, the

[46] On the spiritual authorship and bishops' *parrhesia*, see Rapp (2005), 66–73, 260–79; Sterk (2004), 25–48, especially on Basil.
[47] Raaflaub (2004), 41–61, Brown (1992), 61–4, and Flower (2013), 129–52 on *parrhesia* and self-promotion.
[48] Ambrose of Milan, *De fide* 2.16.141 (*CSEL* 78, 106). Sizgorich (2009), 83.
[49] Theod. *Eccl*. 5.21.3 (*SC* 530, 424).
[50] Sozom. *Eccl*. 6.12.16 (*SC* 495, 308).
[51] Marcos Sanchez (2009): 191–204, is a balanced analysis of Julian's anti-Christian policies.
[52] Greg. Naz. *Or*. 42–43 (*SC* 384). Elm (2012), 473.

worshippers of Trinity.[53] In another speech, Gregory laments the afflictions that the true worshippers of Trinity have faced and parallels two torments, the first by 'Nebuchadnezzar' (that is, Emperor Julian) and the other by the alleged Christian (that is, Valens). Julian received his righteous divine punishment in the Persian campaign "in the hands of the lawless" "by whom his blood was righteously shed because of his unholy shedding of blood." The second persecution, by Valens, was by no means gentler (*philanthrôpoteros*) than the first one, and even worse to suffer because it was achieved by a Christian, though a false one. Gregory explains that Valens' oppression set Christians into difficult positions, as obeying him was ungodly and to suffer (that is, during the reign of Christian emperors) was inglorious. The reason was that those who suffered did not even seem to be mistreated; they did not gain the title of martyr. As the truth was distorted, those suffering as true Christians were punished as impious.[54]

Adrianople and Divine Vengeance

Gregory of Nazianzus and the church historians wrote their polemical accounts after Valens' death. As long as the emperor was alive, most of the criticism remained fairly moderate. Epiphanius of Salamis, as was discussed above, was restrained in his reproach of Valens himself while he channeled his slander against the Homoian bishops. As the target had safely died away, several authors were able to pen their criticism. Themistius, who had praised Valens' *philanthropia* in his lifetime, now approached Valens' successor Theodosius I with panegyrics and uttered hidden criticism against the foregone emperor. The condemnation of predecessors conventionally belonged to the praise of the new regime.[55] Occasionally, Themistius also condemned Valens' policies more openly: "There is no excuse for a king who takes no heed of justice, neither in the cowardice of soldiers nor the indolence of generals."[56] After Valens' death, the fiercest attacks came from Nicene writers, and rumors of his cruelty kept on swelling. For example, the church historians Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret report the rumor according to which Valens had ordered the execution of eighty clerics. This calumny rose from a ship accident: Valens had refused to see a delegation of Nicene clerics and ordered them to exile. They were set to sail away as the ship caught fire and was devastated.[57]

What refueled the post-mortem calumny was Valens' demise in the battle of Adrianople against the Goths in 378. The defeat and death could easily be seen as divine punishment for Valens'

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[53] Greg. Naz. *Or*. 43.30 (*SC* 384, 192).
[54] Greg. Naz. *Or*. 42.3 (*SC* 384, 56–8). Gregory also compares the succeeding persecutors to damaging insects that one after the other destroy the harvest: after a palmerworm comes locust and thereafter caterpillar and cankerworm. Nicene writers also labelled the other Homoian emperor, Constantius, as a false Christian who only pretended to be Christian, even though he was "actually a new enemy of Christ" and he was similar to the earlier persecutors of Christians: Hilar. *Const*. 5 (*SC* 334, 176).
[55] Them. *Or*. 14.183b (in 379). Heather and Moncur (2001), 229; Lenski (2002), 233.
[56] Them. *Or*. 15.189d (in 381); trans. Heather and Moncur (2001), 242. See Vanderspoel (1995), 191–9.
[57] Socr. *Eccl*. 4.16.1–6; Sozom. *Eccl*. 6.14.1–4; Theod. *Eccl*. 4.24.1; the 'burning of clerics' is shortly mentioned in Greg. Naz. *Or*. 43.46 (*SC* 384, 222). Lenski (2002), 250–1 argues that it is unlikely that the accident was Valens' fault.

'heresy' and persecution of the 'orthodox'. Valens' miserable fate was connected with the flourishing tradition of impious oppressors' deaths, of which the most conspicuous example is Lactantius' *On the Deaths of Persecutors* (*De mortibus persecutorum*). Lactantius wrote his work after the end of the Tetrarchic persecution; as all the persecuting emperors were safely dead, they could be attributed with repulsive fates of death. The divine retribution could be used to remind rulers of the connection between public welfare and the correct interpretation of religion. The correct interpretation of the divine guaranteed the welfare of the Empire whereas heresies brought disaster. The leaders of divergent sections stressed this connection for their own purposes.[58] In his *De fide*, Ambrose of Milan explained the military defeats as God's punishment for Valens' "Arianism". The work was part of his campaign against Homoians in Italy and Illyricum, but also the defense of his own doctrinal position to Emperor Gratian, the son and successor of Valentinian I. Ambrose writes that the reason for the divine indignation (*divinae indignationis causa*) is evident: faith (*fides*) in the Roman power has been broken where faith in God has been broken. Ambrose links religious dissidence and barbarian attacks, associating the 'sacrilegious voices' [of 'heretics'] with the 'barbarian attacks' (*sacrilegis pariter vocibus et barbaricis motibus*). He exclaims, "How can the Roman state be secure with such custodians?"[59]

In his narrative, Theodoret anticipates the divine punishment at Adrianople by reporting the admonitions and predictions that Valens disregarded. One of his generals, who was sent to fight against the Goths and returned as beaten, gave a bold warning that the emperor had already lost victory because he struggled against God and the divine support would be transferred to the 'barbarians'. God was taking the enemy's side. Furthermore, a number of clerics warned Valens of his demise. The monk Isaac of Constantinople cried publicly that God had roused the barbarians against the emperor because of his blasphemy and he should stop the war. Moreover, Isaac told Valens to return the flocks of Christians to their best shepherds (that is, Nicene bishops) and promised that he would gain victory without trouble. Otherwise Valens would never return and he would destroy his army. Theodoret comments on the very defeat at Adrianople and Valens' death in a burning village with a brief remark: "Thus Valens paid the penalty of his errors in this present life."[60] Orosius also interpreted Valens' demise as a just judgment of God and Rufinus connected Emperor Valens' alleged 'Arianism' and his defeat at the hands of the Goths at Adrianople in 378.[61]

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[58] For the connection between correct faith and military success, see Millar (2006), 39; Kahlos (2013), 177–93.

[59] Ambr. *fid.* 2.16.139–40 (*CSEL* 78, 106). For the circumstances concerning Ambrose's *De fide*, see McLynn (1994), 102–21.

[60] Theod. *Eccl.* 4.34–7 (*SC* 530, 315–23). Even though the contemporary writers Jerome and Rufinus (see n. 21) mention that Valens recalled Nicene bishops from exile in 378, the later writers Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret do not record Valens' recall. Snee (1985), 404–10 explains this (in my view, plausibly) as the result of anti-Homoian sentiments in Constantinople. The recall by Valens did not fit the idea of the divine punishment that Valens met in the defeat of Adrianople.

[61] Oros. *Hist.* 7.33.19 (Arnaud-Lindet, 92); in 7.33.9 (Arnaud–Lindet, 90), Orosius also ascribes the "root of our miseries" to Valens. Rufin. *Eccl.* 11.13 (*PL* 21, 522–3). For a discussion on the reactions to the battle of Adrianople, see Lenski (1997), 150–7.

Conclusion

The battle of Adrianople sealed Valens' reputation both as a loser and a persecutor. The defeat and his ignominious death made him a particularly suitable object for calumny – according to all the conventions of Greco-Roman as well as Christian invectives. The argument of the divine anger seemed undisputable. A persecutor met a terrible end. Looking at the big picture of the fourth- and fifth-century religious landscape, Valens was not the only emperor to turn against religious dissenters – the groups that did not consent to each emperor's creed. Constantine, Constantius II, Constans, Julian, Theodosius I, Arcadius, Honorius, Theodosius II, and so forth, pressured dissenting groups – with varying force and effect. Valens was probably no harsher than any other emperor but less successful than, say, Theodosius I whose posthumous fame was glorified by numerous Nicene writers such as Ambrose of Milan.

Was Valens 'Arian', as the hostile sources state? It is possible that in Valens' case, the simple labels of 'Arian' and 'Nicene' are not functional. We might even ask whether he was keenly involved in doctrinal issues. The emperor probably supported the Homoian communities because they were dominant in most regions in the East as he attained the throne; he may have simply wanted to maintain the status quo for the practical reasons of social tranquility. The methods the emperor used for keeping order in the Roman Empire were the traditional ones and they were not nice ones – confiscations and banishments. For the Nicene church leaders under pressure, they were persecution, and in their interpretation, they were due to doctrinal issues. The claims of the Nicene ecclesiastical writers, according to which he was led astray and abandoned an original Nicene devotion, most likely were mere calumnies in the line of traditional topoi of misled rulers. During Valens' lifetime, the invectives were moderate; for instance, the image of a misled emperor could be used as an advantageous strategy: the portrayal of a ruler as misinformed and deceived provided his subjects with the opportunity to lay the blame to wicked advisors and even gave the ruler an opportunity to withdraw his flawed decisions.

The label of persecution was powerful weaponry that could be evoked in all kinds of conflicts to undermine a rival, a representative of the secular arm, or a ruler. Any opposing action or attitude could be argued as being persecution.[62] The concept of martyrdom was also widened in the fourth century. Athanasius, for example, defined as martyrs not only those who had died when refusing to offer 'pagan' sacrifices and incense (during the Great persecutions), but also those who were

[62] E.g., Ambrose in the dispute over the altar of Victory argued that the restoration of the altar to the senate house would be a new persecution, as the Christian senators would be forced to face the altar: see Ambr. *Ep.* 72.9 (= *Ep.* 17.9 Maur.); Ambrose of Milan, *Political Letters and Speeches*, *Political Letters and Speeches*, transl. J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005) 66. Likewise, the council of Carthage in 401 (*CCSL* 149, 196–7, can. 60–1) complained to the emperors that pagans "forced" Christians to celebrate public banquets and this even looked like a second persecution in the era of Christian emperors.

not killed when "refusing to renounce their faith."[63] In these circumstances, fourth-century Christian emperors were vulnerable for being accused of creating martyrs and wanted to avoid being branded as a persecutor. This could happen to any administrator in the Empire as the Roman government, including the judicial system, was based on violence. At the head of this mechanism of violence, the Roman Empire, Valens was not able to avoid the wave of calumnies. Using the language martyrdom, Nicene writers portrayed him as an imitator of the earlier persecuting emperors and Nicene bishops as the heirs of the martyrs. Valens became a part of the self-generative Christian narratives of persecution.

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GCS = Griechische christliche Schriftsteller
GRBS = Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies
CCSL = Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina
CSEL = Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
JRS = Journal of Roman Studies
LCL = Loeb Classical Library
PL = Patrologia Latina
SC = Sources chrétiennes

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[63] Athanasius, *Ad episcopos Aegypti et Libyae* 21.3. Flower, *Emperors and Bishops*, 152; for exile as a measure of the orthodoxy of clerics, see Barry (2016), 251–62; for Athanasius' ability to present his sufferings as persecution, see Watts (2010), 178-81; Gaddis (2005), 38.

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