In 1994, the German historian Karl-Heinz Schwarte published a paper in which he challenged the scholarly consensus according to which the legal basis of the ‘Great Persecution’ consisted in four edicts that had been successively promulgated during the reign of Diocletian.\(^1\) Schwarte argued that there had been only one edict which prescribed the destruction of the churches and the burning of the holy books and ordered everyone to sacrifice. It was the edict’s intention to destroy Christianity by enforcing mass apostasy. By these drastic measures Diocletian wished to prepare and underpin the smooth transition from the first to the second tetrarchy. In the following I wish to give a brief outline of Schwarte’s arguments and conclusions, put forward some arguments that question their validity and conclude by sketching a different view.

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view.² Whereas Lactantius mentions only one edict, according to the consensus view Eusebius reports four of them.

Sch. then proceeds to a detailed literary analysis of both Lactantius and Eusebius. With regard to Lactantius he notes the distorting tendency of putting most of the blame on Galerius instead of Diocletian: Since Lactantius was looking for striking examples of the cruel and unusual deaths of the persecutors of Christians and since Diocletian provided no such example, Lactantius selected Galerius rather than Diocletian as a target.³ But, Sch. stresses, this anti-Galerian bias did not tempt Lactantius into a total misrepresentation of the events: Galerius is never explicitly blamed for initiating the persecution; Lactantius does not deny that it was in fact Diocletian who took the important decisions regarding it.⁴ Sch. paints Lactantius as a worthy successor to a writer as contortedly suggestive as Tacitus: The result is an account that is brilliantly and willfully confused.⁵ Moreover, it is Lactantius’ literary strategy not to reveal at the outset the full contents of the first and only edict. This enables him to suggest to his readers that the dynamics behind the persecution was the discrepancy between the measures undertaken by Diocletian and the more murderous intentions of his Caesar Galerius.⁶ Lactantius blames Galerius for the fire in the palace at Nicomedia: The Caesar wished to justify a persecution of Christians.⁷ For Sch. the measures against eunuchi and domestici as described in mort. 15,2-3 are in fact the consequences of a general sacrifice order that was contained in the first and only edict. The passage in mort. 15,2 reporting the arrest and deportation of Christian clergy and their families (comprehensi presbyteri ac ministri et sine ulla probatione aut confessione damnati cum omnibus suis deducebantur) should not be taken as referring to punitive measures against Diocletian’s court in the wake of the palace fire in Nicomedia unless one wishes to assume that Diocletian’s court counted among its members a considerable number of Christian clergy. In mort. 15,4 Lactantius explic-

² Schwarte, op.cit., 206.
³ Schwarte, op.cit., 207f.
⁴ Schwarte, op.cit., 208.
⁵ Schwarte, ibidem.
⁶ Schwarte, op.cit., 212.